

CHAPTER I

Simplicity and perfection

'We also are religious and our religion is simple', objected the Roman proconsul to the martyr Speratus, at his trial near Carthage on 17 July 180. 'If you will listen calmly', replied Speratus, 'I shall tell you the mystery of simplicity.'¹ Tertullian was not the only African who liked paradox.² Speratus claims simplicity for Christians rather than pagans. He counters the accusation that Christians are secret and sinister, by asserting that their secret is simplicity. He draws on the New Testament account of the mystery of salvation. The writer to the Ephesians had been concerned to tell the nations of the unsearchable riches of Christ and to bring to light 'the economy of the mystery which has been hidden from all ages in the God who created all things' (Eph. 3.9). The church declares to heavenly powers the manifold (πολυποίκιλος) wisdom of God (Eph. 3.10), which is the divine mystery. The end of salvation, the vision of Christ and the church present a great mystery (Eph. 5.32).

Tertullian's lust for simplicity, supported by superlatives, persists throughout his work and is a good place to begin a study of his thought. A fine exposition, which begins 'Tertullien déconcerte', goes on to insist that Tertullian took a simple and total choice when

¹ Speratus speaks in reply to the proconsul's claim, 'Et nos religiosi sumus et simplex est nostra religio.' Speratus says, 'Si tranquillas praebueris aures tuas, dico mysterium simplicitatis.' *Passio sanctorum Scillitanorum*, 3f. See *Acta Martyrum*, ed. H. Musurillo, *The acts of the Christian martyrs* (Oxford, 1972), 86.

² This term is commonly used of Tertullian in the sense of apparent contradiction (Cicero: 'admirabilia contraque opinionem omnium' (*Paradoxa Stoicorum*, 4)), rather than in the more complex logical sense (Zeno, Russell). See J. van Heyenroot, *Logical Paradoxes*, in P. Edwards (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. v (New York, 1967), 45–51. The two senses will sometimes over-lap.

he became a Christian and that his complexity comes from his earlier intellectual formation; whether a study of his thought begins from either simplicity or complexity, it will discover a profound unity.³

A man of keen and violent disposition (*acris et vehementis ingenii*),⁴ much of Tertullian's lively talk is concerned with clarifying what others have confused. Like Paul, he reiterates that he wants to know nothing but Christ crucified. Christ revealed himself, not as a tradition, but as truth (*virg.* 1.1). Truth is simple (*ap.* 23.7f.), but philosophers have mixed with it their own opinions (*ap.* 47.4) and sunk to a perversity (*Marc.* 5.19.8) which tortures truth ('unde ista tormenta cruciandae simplicitatis et suspendendae veritatis?' *an.* 18.7). The soul testifies in its simplicity (*test.* 1.6) and its evidence is simple and divine (*test.* 5.1). Truth leads to beauty so female dress should be marked by simplicity (*cult.* 1.2.4 et passim). When Valentinians accuse ordinary Christians of simplicity, he replies 'although simple, we nevertheless know everything' (*Val.* 3.5). He writes (*res.* 2.11) to strengthen the faith of simple believers, employing his rhetorical skill on their behalf against heretics (*res.* 5.1).

THE SIMPLE BEGINNING

The divine economy of salvation is reflected in Christian baptism, which points to past and future. Life begins at baptism; here Tertullian shows his yearning for what is simple, in 'the sacrament of our Christian water, which washes away the sins of our original blindness and frees us for eternal life' (*bapt.* 1.1). Yet simplicity never displaces reason. Those who do not examine the reasons behind simple baptism, and who stay with an unexamined faith, are vulnerable through their ignorance (*ibid.*). The wrong kind of simplicity needs instruction, guidance and protection (*res.* 2.11).⁵

³ 'This unity lies behind the pseudo-paradoxes and pseudo-contradictions.' J.-C. Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique* (Paris, 1972), 485.

⁴ Jerome, *vir. illust.* 57.

⁵ In this bad sense, the greater part of the faithful are *simplices* (*ne dixerim imprudentes et idiotae*) who, having moved from many gods to one God, panic at the exposition of the trinity (*Prax.* 3. 1). The same people are uncertain about the value of martyrdom, find their doubts exploited by Gnostics (*scorp.* 1.5), and cannot answer objections against the madness of dying for God (*scorp.* 1.7).

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Tertullian rejects the naïveté of those who want a proof-text which forbids their attendance at the games (*spect.* 3.1) and the artless heresy which abolishes all discipline (*praescr.* 41.3).

A heretical viper⁶ has turned many away from baptism, through that common perversity which rejects anything simple. ‘Nothing, absolutely nothing, hardens human minds as much as the obvious simplicity of what God does, and the contrasting greatness of what he thereby achieves. The unadorned fact, that with such radical simplicity, without pomp, without any special preparation, and indeed, at no cost, a man is lowered into water, is dipped, while a few words are spoken, and then emerges, not much (if at all) cleaner, makes it all the more incredible that he gains eternal life in this way’ (*bapt.* 2.1). In striking contrast, idol worship uses every possible embroidery of ritual and every additional expense.

Fussy, wretched incredulity denies God’s primary properties of simplicity and power, which should be received with wonder and faith. God is found by the simple in heart (*praescr.* 7.10) and he appeared to Elijah openly and simply (*apertus et simplex, pat.* 15.6). God is too simple to have worked a Docetist deception (*cam.* 5.10). For the unbeliever, there is nothing in such plain acts as baptism and the pretended effects are impossible: which illustrates how God uses foolish things to confound worldly wisdom and does easily what men find most difficult.

The subtlety of God’s simplicity is linked with his wisdom and power, which derive stimulus from their opposites of folly and impossibility, ‘since every virtue receives its cause from those things by which it is provoked’ (*bapt.* 2.3). So strife becomes a second theme of Tertullian’s thought.⁷ He links it with Pauline paradox, and it is fundamental to the Stoicism which looked back to Heraclitus whom Justin saw as a Christian before Christ. Simplicity and weakness belong to God as his omnipotent rejection of earthly power and wisdom. Christians who follow this divine simplicity are little fishes (*bapt.* 1.3) who cannot live apart from the water of baptism. Here their faith is contracted to the one word

⁶ The Cainite heresy which honoured Cain because he resisted the evil God of the Old Testament. Tertullian’s snakes prefer dry places.

⁷ See discussion of paradox in ch. 3 and of opposites in ch. 4.

ἰχθύς which stands for Ἰησοῦς χριστός θεοῦ υἱός σωτήρ (Jesus Christ, son of God, saviour).⁸

Repetition underlines simplicity and Tertullian employs it to reinforce his claims. More than this, his key words (goodness, reason and discipline) link together diverse things which are derived from one simple divine origin. Goodness explains every part of the creative act (*Marc.* 2.4.5). Reason is founded in God who is ever rational, and provides grounds for Tertullian's every argument (including his paradoxes) and for his constant attacks upon his opponents (*paen.* 1). *Ratio* is his favourite word. Discipline governs all details of conduct. The constant refrain of these themes provides unity in his writing.

Christians are plain people because they accept the world as God's creation. This means that they do not run off into seclusion, but live like others; they eat, dress, bathe, work, trade, sail, fight, farm and practise a craft. They do not observe the common religious rites; but they are no less human or reasonable for that (*ap.* 42.4). Their simple lives are matched in modesty by simple dress (*cult.* 2.13.3). They follow the New Testament aesthetic of 'putting on' Christ.

Simplicity, in Tertullian, sometimes exacts its price and affects his arguments. The sudden enunciation of God's name is, for most, not the testimony of a soul which is naturally Christian, but the testimony of a soul which is not very Christian. The appeal to lines of episcopal succession is controversial rather than an end to controversy and, in any case, Tertullian always wants to obey conscience rather than bishop. In his case the two rarely agree.⁹ Above all, Tertullian seems to fail in his account of divine justice and love. In his rejection of Marcion, he claims that only retributive justice can discourage sin.¹⁰

These matters will be dealt with again later. The points to note at this stage are three. First, we must expect that a passion for simplicity might induce errors. Theology, like philosophy, is a

⁸ To this formula we shall return in the second part of this chapter.

⁹ Charles Munier, *La tradition apostolique chez Tertullien*, in *Collected studies series CS341, Autorité épiscopale et sollicitude pastorale, L'année canonique*, 33 (Paris, 1979), 175–92 (192).

¹⁰ See below, ch. 5. Despite initial simplicity, Tertullian develops a complex argument here.

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complex matter and those who cut corners suffer accidents.¹¹ Second, those who turn every corner arrive nowhere. Debate differs from argument. The orator who silences his opponent rarely uses adequate argument. Against the plea for fear as an essential deterrent against sin, Marcion simply shook his head and said 'Absit'; he was silent but not convinced. Third, theologians and other exponents of rational argument commonly make a few bad mistakes. By far the best example is Augustine, who dominated a culture for a thousand years, and whose argument for the liquidation of schismatics through the severity of love¹² is only matched, for unconvincing barbarity, by his accounts of predestination and original sin. These three dangers make an exploration of Tertullian's arguments obligatory.

INTRICATE APOLOGETIC

Tertullian's defence of simplicity will always have a twist of paradox, and qualifications of fundamental force. There are his own deep conflicts. How complicated was he? One writer¹³ produced a book to probe the disorder of his personality, another composed a large tome to show the perversity of his ethics.¹⁴ Many have followed the verdict that he is a troubled fideist.¹⁵

More disconcerting is the praise of his admirers. Even a sober scholar could write: 'Roman restraint, legal clarity and military discipline were transmuted into an intellectual and moral force in the ardent, aspiring mind and heart of Tertullian.'¹⁶ Enthusiasm gallops away with another:

Ardent in temperament, endowed with an intelligence as subtle and original as it was aggressive and audacious, he added to his natural gifts a

¹¹ Gerhard Ebeling often set out his lectures in numbered chapters, sections, paragraphs and even propositions. When he once came to chapter 4, section 3, paragraph 5, proposition 2, he paused and said with a smile, 'Entschuldigen Sie, bitte, wenn ich alles zu einfach mache!'

¹² *On the Epistle of John*, 7.8. See my, *Ethical patterns in early Christian thought* (Cambridge, 1976), 179–81.

¹³ B. Nisters, *Tertullian, seine Persönlichkeit und sein Schicksal* (Münster, 1950).

¹⁴ C. Rambaux, *Tertullien face aux morales des trois premiers siècles* (Paris, 1979).

¹⁵ See following chapters for discussion of A. Labhardt, Tertullien et la philosophie ou la recherche d'une 'position pure', *MH*, 7 (1950), 159–80.

¹⁶ H. von Campenhausen, *The fathers of the Latin church* (London, 1964), 6.

profound erudition, which far from impeding only gave weight to the movements of his alert and robust mind . . . Harassed from without, the African Church was also torn from within by an accumulation of evils; apostasies, heresies, and schisms abounded. Up through the confusion were thrust Tertullian's mighty shoulders, casting off the enemies of the Gospel on every side. He was not formed for defensive warfare.¹⁷

It is regrettable that some scholars want to award prizes rather than to understand what is alien to them.

A recent and restrained assessment, which touches lightly on the ideas of Tertullian in favour of his history and his literary achievement, calls him a 'Christian Sophist'.¹⁸ This is helpful, but uncomfortably ambiguous, since Tertullian spent much time attacking and repudiating what is commonly regarded as sophistry.

How complex is Tertullian? There is no lack of intricate argument, however forcefully it may be presented; worse still, in the interests of simplicity and speed, steps are often omitted and details which have appeared earlier are not repeated. We might call this 'Tertullian's Trick'; because often, when we think we have found a fallacy and caught him out, we find that he has answered our objection elsewhere. A good orator does not repeat detail. For his interpreters today, this should be less of a difficulty after fifty years of philosophical analysis; but some still look for systems and the fun of deconstructing them. Many manage to ignore the truth that conclusions are ambiguous without the argument which leads to them. In order to understand an author we must remember the cards he has already played.

To a remarkable extent, Tertullian respected conventional rhetorical forms which made his work more accessible to his contemporaries.¹⁹ Tertullian faced a complex situation, where the culture of Greece and Rome, the religion of Israel and the new faith in Jesus came together in a mixture of conflict and agreement. Each component had internal diversity within which Tertullian had to choose. A critical eclecticism was characteristic of all parties. The importance of Tertullian for cultural history is immense, and

¹⁷ B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine* (Oxford, 1930), 3f.

¹⁸ T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian, A historical and literary study*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1985), 211–32.

¹⁹ See R. D. Sider, *Ancient rhetoric and the art of Tertullian* (Oxford, 1971), and the work of C. Munier, J.-C. Fredouille and H. Steiner who sees this valuable area of study as 'wohl erschöpft'.

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he may rightly be called the 'first theologian of the West', provided this does not limit his influence to the West or obscure his massive debt to Irenaeus.²⁰ Justin had anticipated him, by his move to Rome, and it is remarkable how much had been achieved. But Justin still writes in Greek and his ideas are difficult because undeveloped. His interest is that of an originator whose ideas are taken up and developed by others who add, alter and diverge. As a result, his own meaning is frequently uncertain.

Tertullian's achievement was not merely cultural and linguistic, but above all intellectual. For, 'despite his obvious originality, he displays those characteristics which are to be found throughout Latin Christianity: a realism which knows nothing of the Platonist devaluation of matter; a subjectivity, which gives special prominence to inner experience; and a pessimism which lays more stress on the experience of sin than on transfiguration'.²¹

Tertullian believed in change. Plato gave place to Heraclitus and the Stoics. The way up is the way down. All things change and all things renew themselves. Nothing ends except to begin again (*res.* 12). While Clement, for all his delight in Heraclitus, looked beyond the world of material things to Plato's intellectual realities (*strom.* 6.1), Tertullian saw reality in flesh and matter, and found truth in an unending series of paradoxes.

He began as an apologist and apologetic displays the contingency of theology and philosophy.²² It begins from a faith to which objections are made by opponents or experiences of widely diverse kinds. Faith's defender must answer the several objections of A, B, C and D, with groups of arguments. Against A he must prove $\alpha\beta\gamma$, against B he must prove $\alpha\delta\epsilon\zeta$, against C he must prove $\gamma\eta\theta$ and against D he must prove $\kappa\lambda\mu$. Now in at least some instances, α will conflict with λ , γ with κ , ζ with θ , and so on. Romans will not like his higher loyalty to Christ, radical Christians will not like his political conformism, some will find him too indulgent and others will find him too ascetic; either they will not dance when they hear

²⁰ Note the necessary qualification of G. L. Prestige, *God in patristic thought* (London, 1936), 97: 'He was very far, indeed, from being merely the father of Latin theology. His ultimate influence on Greek theological speculation was probably very considerable.'

²¹ J. Daniélou, *Latin Christianity*, 341.

²² See D. Allen, *Motives, rationales, and religious beliefs, APQ*, 3 (1966), 112ff., for a useful account of the logic of objection and rebuttal.

the pipes or they will not lament with those who mourn. When the Baptist neither eats nor drinks, he is demonic and when Jesus eats and drinks he is a glutton and a winebibber (Matt. 11.16–19).

However consistent the position of the apologist is, it will not appear consistent until there has been careful analysis and then it may look too complex.

They live in countries of their own, but simply as sojourners; they share the life of citizens, they endure the lot of foreigners; every foreign land is to them a fatherland, and every fatherland a foreign land. They marry like the rest of the world. They breed children, but they do not cast their offspring adrift. They eat together but do not sleep together. They exist in the flesh, but they live not after the flesh. They spend their existence upon earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, and in their own lives they surpass the laws . . . The Jews war against them as aliens, and the Greeks persecute them.²³

To meet apparent inconsistencies, like Tertullian's denigration and exaltation of marriage and philosophy, apologetic needs linking argument (for which it may not have enough time) as well as a few general concepts (economy of salvation, logos) which maintain a scattered presence.²⁴ Tertullian goes further, so that these concepts embrace fundamental questions of theology. The remarkable thing is that, for all his vehemence, his ideas do hold together. He had a deep, abiding concern. As a Stoic, he began with an undefined consciousness of God.²⁵ As a Christian, he filled that concept with the gospel, the story of salvation which ran from creation to apocalypse. The golden thread which runs through his thought is the recapitulation of all things in Christ.

Apologetic presents an extreme case of the tensions faced by all philosophy and theology. Today, theologians are reluctant to distinguish historical from systematic theology because every theology is marked by its historical situation and specific questions. This move is mirrored in a wider reaction against the scientific

²³ *Ad Diognetum*, 5.

²⁴ A recent writer calls this 'polemical Christianity'. (A. J. Guerra, *Polemical Christianity: Tertullian's search for certainty, The Second Century* (1990), 108). He points out that Tertullian draws on five kinds of support for his position (scripture, reason, moral excellence, spiritual witness and tradition) and that he uses different combinations when he attacks different enemies.

²⁵ In modern jargon, 'a God-shaped blank'.

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positivism which was the last gesture of Enlightenment epistemology. In a wide-ranging review of the human sciences, we find one common feature: 'a willingness to emphasise the local and contingent, a desire to underline the extent to which our own concepts and attitudes have been shaped by particular historical circumstances, and a correspondingly strong dislike – amounting almost to hatred in the case of Wittgenstein – of all overarching theories and singular schemes of explanation'.²⁶ An apologist, like Tertullian, is more likely to be understood in such an intellectual climate. For we have all learnt that within the most carefully argued and tidy system, there are polarities and contradictions which cannot be ignored. What Gödel showed for mathematics (that there is no self-sufficient, consistent autonomy) seems true of all rational systems.

What did Tertullian write? His many writings show the range of his apologetic.²⁷ In 197, he exhorts the martyrs (*mart.*), confronting the major challenge to faith which was the suffering of God's faithful people and defending the faith before a persecuting state (*nat., ap.*). Between 198 and 206, he argues that faith is natural (*test.*), he confronts the Jewish attack (*Jud.*) – the gospel had come to Carthage through Jewish Christians. The threat of heresy is met with a general response and a statement of the essential rule of Christian faith (*praescr.*). One well-argued alternative, the dualism of Hermogenes (*Herm.*) is dissected, analysed and refuted. The public behaviour of Christians is rigorously directed away from attendance at games (*spect.*), frequency of marriage (*ux.*) and fine clothing (*cult.*). Prayer (*or.*) and baptism (*bapt.*) explain matters of devotion and worship. Patience (*pat.*) is a private virtue while penitence (*paen.*) has both private and public consequences.

During his middle period (207–8) when signs of Montanist²⁸ influence begin to appear, substantial works are directed against heretical dualism. The work *Against Marcion* (*Marc.*)²⁹ owes its present form to this period, but builds on earlier work. Valentinians are attacked both in the short work which bears their name

²⁶ Quentin Skinner, *The return of grand theory to the human sciences* (Cambridge, 1985), 12.

²⁷ On the chronology of Tertullian's works, I accept the argument and conclusions of R. Braun, *Deus Christianorum*, 563–77.

²⁸ See below, ch. 10. ²⁹ See below, ch. 5.

(*Val.*) and in the anti-docetic works which defend the flesh (*carn., res.*). Chastity (*cast.*) and modest dress (*virg.*) continue the ascetic strain of ethics while the hostility of the state to Christians is further considered (*cor., scorp.*) and a particular oppressor is challenged (*Scap.*). Idolatry is condemned as false and the source of all evil (*idol.*) and the nature of the soul is examined (*an.*).

During the final period of his writing (213–22), Tertullian is plainly at odds with catholic, ‘psychic’ (unspiritual)³⁰ Christianity. Rigorous ethical demands are expressed in the rejection of flight during persecution (*fug.*) and remarriage (*mon.*), and the commendation of fasting (*iei.*) and modesty (*pud.*). His attack on Praxeas defends the distinction of persons within the trinity and the distinction of substances within the incarnate Christ (*Prax.*). Yet the chains of secular culture retain their subordinate place below the ‘better philosophy’ (*pall.*).

Tertullian’s one central idea (the economy of salvation perfected in Christ) runs from his *apologeticum* to the better philosophy (*pall.*) and his theology of trinity and incarnation (*Prax.*). This provides internal unity to his thought, within all complexity. It is the constant factor. Montanism is the result, not the cause, of Tertullian’s concern for the perfection of the divine economy.

Tertullian has two external controls on the complexities of apologetic and theology: brevity and paradox. Brevity had been claimed as a Christian virtue from the beginning (1 Tim. 1.3f.). Justin (1 *apol.* 14) took the brevity of Christ’s sayings as proof he was not a sophist, and Irenaeus contrasted the short word of the gospel with the long-winded law. Sextus (*sent.* 4.30) linked brevity with the knowledge of God. For Tertullian, truth and brevity (*Marc.* 2.28.3), certainty and brevity (*an.* 2.7) go together. The Lord’s Prayer is a compendium of the whole gospel (*or.* 9.1). Conciseness is a welcome necessity; prolixity is a bore (*virg.* 4.4). On this theme scripture, especially the Wisdom literature, and Stoic tradition coincided.³¹ We have already noted some reasons for brevity. As an orator and a preacher, Tertullian leaves a lot out, so that he will not lose his

³⁰ The term is taken from Paul (1 Cor. 2.14; 15.44–6) where ψυχικός is contrasted with πνευματικός.

³¹ J.-C. Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique*, 33, notes Zeno (D.L. 7.59), Cicero, Seneca (*ep.* 38), Tacitus and Marcus Aurelius (*med.* 4.51).