Tertullian's Description of the Heathen

I. L. S. Balfour

Edinburgh

ALL 31 of Tertullian's extant treatises make some reference to the heathen.[1] The word which he used most frequently was *nati051*, and in this he was unique — the *Thesaurus linguae latinae* demonstrates that every other Latin patristic writer preferred *gens* to *natio*. It is appropriate, therefore, that Tertullian's treatise to the heathen at large should be entitled *ad nationes* and that it should be almost the only surviving apology so addressed. However, despite the common view that *natio* is 'Tertullian's word for the heathen', it accounts for less than 40% of his references to non-believers. This brief study takes his four most common words for the heathen — *ethnicus*, *gens*, *gentilis*, and *natio* — and attempts to suggest why and when Tertullian favoured one word in preference to another.

To put these four words into context, it should be mentioned that Tertullian used a variety of other words and phrases to refer to the heathen — *caecus* (blind), *damnatus* (damned), *deum nesciunt* (they do not know God), *extraneus* (stranger), *filius iracundiae* (child of anger), *filius irae* (child of wrath), *hostis dei* (enemy of God), *ignorans dei* (ignorant of God), *infidelis* (unbeliever), *iniquis* (wicked), *iniustus* (unjust), *inreligiosus* (irreligious), *in tenebris* (in darkness), *in umbra mortis* (in the shadow of death), *nocentes* (culpable), *non integre ad deum* (not right with God), *peccator* (sinner), *perditus* (lost), *profanus* (profane), and *sine domine lumine* (without the light of God).

Furthermore, he sometimes used *barbarus* (foreign), *communis* (general), *profanus* (unholy), *saeculum* (worldly) and *saecularis* (profane) in the sense of 'heathen', although he did not normally employ these words to contrast pagans with Christians. *Paganus* itself appears three times in his works, but always in the sense of 'civilian' as opposed to 'soldier', not 'pagan' as opposed to 'Christian'; it is generally agreed that *paganus* did not acquire a religious meaning until the fourth or the beginning of the fifth century.

When the complete list is looked at, however, Tertullian's words and phrases for the heathen are dominated by four words, and to these four the remainder of this paper is devoted.

1. *Ethnicus*, translated by Lewis and Short as 'a heathen, a pagan', appears 110 times, of which all but one are intended to designate those outside the faith.

2. *Gens*, translated 'pagan nations, heathen, gentiles, opposed to Jews and Christians', appears 162 times, but of these only 60 (i.e. as little as 37%) refer to the heathen — the remainder are references to 'tribes', 'races', 'peoples', and 'nations' without religious connotation. Tertullian's lack of enthusiasm for *gens* as a word for the heathen is evident from the fact it does not appear at all, in that sense, in over three-quarters of his works.

3. *Gentilis*, translated 'a heathen, a pagan, a gentile, opposed to Jewish or Christian', appears 45 times, all but two of which are distinctively heathen.

4. *Natio* is illustrated by Lewis and Short, in its ecclesiastical sense, only from the writings of Tertullian and is translated by them 'opposite of Christian, heathen'. It tops the list with 218 appearances, of which 188 refer to the heathen, three in the singular and the remainder in the plural.

I have not drawn any distinction here between these four words used as adjectives and used as nouns, because I doubt whether that is of any significance for this study. Time and space unfortunately forbad any enquiry into the etymology of the words as a factor in Tertullian's choice of them — i.e. whether he was influenced, in context, by a Greek background, or by Greek borrowing or by words purely Latin. The same restrictions exclude any enquiry here into the influence of the Scriptural versions on Tertullian's choice of words for the heathen — i.e. whether equivalents from the Septuagint or from the Greek Testament or from the *Vetus Latina* were a factor in his usage.

My first analysis was to look at these four words chronologically[2] and to ask whether Tertullian's movement from Catholicism to Montanism might have influenced his choice of words for the heathen. *Natio* occasioned no surprise. As might be expected of Tertullian's favourite word for the heathen, *natio* (or rather *nationes*) is distributed evenly throughout his works. It appears in the first and in the last, and in most of the works between (see the chart appended). To that extent, it justifies its reputation as Tertullian's regular word for the heathen.

The analysis of *ethnicus* and of *gens/gentilis* was more rewarding. *Ethnicus* appears in only two works before the Montanist influence on Tertullian becomes apparent; it then grows rapidly in favour, appearing in most of the treatises after the first book against Marcion, and nearly one-third of the total usage appears in Tertullian's last work, *de pudicitia*. More than that, his increasing preference for *ethnicus* is marked by a corresponding decline in the use of *gens* and *gentilis*; *gens* (even in the non-heathen sense) appears less and less frequently as the Montanist influence grows and *gentilis* never appears at all after *adversus Marcionem*. Furthermore, taking a very broad view of the trend, it seems that whichever word was in favour at the moment — be it *gens* or *ethnicus* — tends to outweigh, for that period of Tertullian's

life, his use of *natio*. Only during the transitional time in the middle was *natio* the dominant word.

But was chronology the reason for that? My second analysis looked at the four words from the viewpoint of Tertullian's intended readership — catechumen or mature Christian, political governor, heretic, philosopher or other non-Christian. The appended chart divides his works into apologetic, anti-heretical and Christian readership. As will be seen, *ethnicus* does not appear in any apologetic work. That apart — and I am not persuaded it is cause and effect — the second analysis does not contradict the general conclusions from the first. Irrespective of intended readership, *gens* and *gentilis* were Tertullian's favourite words at the beginning of his Christian life, more popular even than *natio*; but *ethnicus* took the place of all three as the years went by. Is it only coincidence that *ethnicus*, the word favoured by Tertullian in his Montanist days, and the one which features most in his anti-Catholic works, is the only one of the four words to find little favour with subsequent Latin Fathers?

My third analysis enquired whether the words themselves were intended to convey different shades of meaning or whether — as is often implied by commentators — Tertullian used them interchangeably. I divided his references to the heathen into four broad categories[3], viz:

- a) heathen as opposed to Christian.
- b) heathen in relation to God.
- c) heathen in contrast with the Jew.
- d) heathen in general terms, not specifically contrasted with Christians or with God or with Jews (e.g. 'monogamy is prized by the heathen' or 'heathen literature').

Certain shades of emphasis seem to emerge and the following conclusions are tentatively put forward, one from each category.

a) When Tertullian wanted to compare or contrast the heathen with the Christian, which he frequently did, he normally used *ethnicus* — and he kept it largely for this purpose. As an experiment, I translated *ethnicus*, in my own mind, as 'the heathen next door', as opposed to heathenism in the abstract or the far-away barbaric tribes. I found that normally it fitted very well — *ethnicus* was the pagan cheek-by-jowl with the Christian in the daily world of Carthage. When Tertullian used *natio* to contrast pagan with Christian, it was much more abstract — e.g. the coming of the Kingdom of God would be 'the hope of the Christian and the confounding of the heathen'.[4] As for *gens*, it never once referred to a pagan as opposed to a Christian, and *gentilis* referred almost without exception to pagan woman. There is not much evidence of interchangeability here.

b) My second category was the heathen in their relationship to God. No doubt for the reasons just mentioned, the positions are here reversed. *Ethnicus* appeared in only three works, e.g. 'the mercy of God abounds for the pagans'[5] — and it was *natio* which dominated this usage. By way of further contrast, *gentilis* never appeared at

all but *gens* did — at least in early, anti-heretical works. Basically, however, the heathen in their relationship to God were *nationes*.

c) The heathen in contrast with the Jew, provided a surprise. I had assumed, perhaps naively, but encouraged by my etymological dictionary, that our word Gentile was derived in some way from *gentilis*. Tertullian confounded me — he used *natio* almost all the time — page after page of it in *adversus Marcionem*, but also in apologetic and Christian works. Outside of *adversus Judaios*, *gens* and *ethnicus* hardly ever mean Gentile as opposed to Jew, and *gentilis* was used in only three of the 132 places where Tertullian contrasted the heathen with the Jew; *natio* was again his basic word.

d) Finally, for the word 'heathen' in its widest sense, as we would use it in ordinary conversation, all four words were used freely, but *gentilis* particularly implied the conduct of pagan women — clothing, food, behaviour — the features of life where Tertullian so often lectured the *feminas*.

I have heard it said, by those whom I respect, that *nationes* was 'Tertullian's word for the heathen'; in print it is stated that when he described the heathen, '*ethnici* was common and *gentes* commoner still'.[6] Such statements may need some qualification.

REFERENCES

1. In the chart appended (see following page), there is no reference to the heathen against several of Tertullian's works; he did refer to the heathen in those works, but not by the four words analysed in the chart.

2. I am not unaware of the problems of arranging the works of Tertullian in date order.

3. Some uses obviously refuse to conform to such a neat and artificial classification.
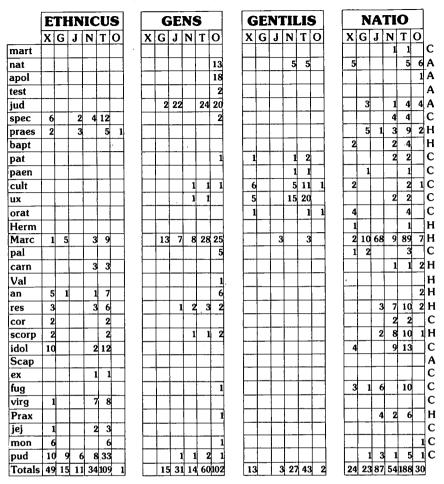
4. *Votum Christianorum, confusio nationum (de oratione 5.4).*

5. *dignatio dei et in ethnicos (de anima 47.12).*

6. J.M. Lupton, 'Q. Septimi Florentis Tertulliani *De Baptismo*' (Cambridge, 1908), p. 26, n. 7.

	ETHNICUS X	G	J	N	T	O	GENS X	G	J	N	T	O	GENTILIS X	G	J	N	T	O	NATIO X	G	J	N	T	O	
mart																						1	1		C
nat												13				5	5		5				5	6	A
apol												18												1	A
test												2													A
jud							2		22		24	20								3		1	4	4	A
spec	6		2	4	12							2										4	4		C
praes	2		3		5	1														5	1	3	9	2	H
bapt																			2			2	4		H
pat												1	1			1	2					2	2		C
paen																1	1			1			1		C
cult										1	1	1	6			5	11	1	2				2	1	C
ux										1	1		5			15	20					2	2		C
orat													1				1	1	4				4		C
Herm																			1				1		H
Marc	1	5		3	9		13	7	8		28	25			3		3		2	10	68	9	89	7	H
pal												5							1	2			3		C
carn				3	3																	1	1	2	H
Val												1													H
an	5	1		1	7							6												2	H
res	3			3	6			1	2		3	2								3	7		10	2	H
cor	2				2																	2	2		C
scorp	2				2				1	1	2									2	8		10	1	H
idol	10			2	12														4			9	13		C
Scap																									A
ex				1	1																				C
fug												1							3	1	6		10		C
virg	1			7	8																				C
Prax												1									4	2	6		H
jej	1			2	3																				C
mon	6				6							1												1	C
pud	10	9	6	8	33			1	1		2	1								1	3	1	5	1	C
Totals	49	15	11	34	109	1	15	31	14	60	102		13		3	27	43	2	24	23	87	54	188	30	

CODE TO CHART

X = in contrast to Christians.

G = in relation to God.

J = in contrast with the Jews.

N = in general terms.

T = total of all usages where the meaning 'heathen' was intended.

O = total of all usages where some meaning other than 'heathen' was intended.

A = apologetic treatises, addressed to heathen.

C = Christian readers intended - disciplinary, moral, ascetical, or practical treatises.

H = controversial-dogmatic-polemic-anti-heretical treatises.