

Tertullian's Religious Beliefs before his Conversion

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Residents of Carthage in the second half of the second century CE had a wide choice of whom and what to worship¹. In seeking to identify Tertullian's religious beliefs before he adopted Christianity, three filters are required – (1) geography (Carthage, but not elsewhere), (2) social standing (educated middle class, but not elite), and (3) time (mid- to late-second century, but not earlier).

Joyce Salisbury, in her 1997 study, 'Perpetua's Passion', phrased it slightly differently: she analysed 'prevailing ideas in ever-narrowing circles' (Rome, Carthage, the Christian Community), because '[Perpetua's] martyrdom cannot be understood outside the spaces and values of Carthage'². I prefer the word 'filters' to 'ever-narrowing circles', but the point is well made – we must look for Tertullian's pre-conversion beliefs in his family situation in mid- to late-second century Carthage.

For the first filter (Carthage, but not elsewhere), Tertullian twice explained why geography is important – 'Every province and city has its own god', he wrote, and again, he referred to 'the little coteries of gods in each municipality, which have their honours confined within their own city walls'³. Every city had its own *sacra publica* (its public cults), shaped by the local *ordo decurionum* (defined below), which controlled the city's public religion⁴.

The powers in Rome were satisfied to leave it on that basis – confident that the *ordo*, the elite at Carthage, would direct its municipal cults in the service of the empire. Their confidence was justified. The *ordo* in cities like Carthage willingly identified with Roman cults in two ways. Initially, as Roman citizens in an alien land, they wanted to 'make a statement' about their Roman identity. Tertullian tells us that Carthage had instituted its own cult based on the chief cult of Rome, the Capitoline Triad of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva⁵. By making it part of their own *sacra publica*, the Romans in Carthage identified with Rome and distanced themselves from their subjugated neighbours. Secondly, because the emperor tied them all together, most cities

¹ Reasons for this are suggested in J.B. Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustus to Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 186, 192, 234.

² Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 3.

³ *apologeticus* 24.7; *ad nationes* 2.8.7.

⁴ Rives, *Religion and Authority*, pp. 12, 50, 60, 96, 151, 170, 185.

⁵ *de spectaculis* 11.1.

willingly embraced also the imperial cult, the worship of the emperor as a god, thus 'making a further statement', this time about their relationship with the rest of the empire⁶.

However, by Tertullian's time, there was a third element in the *sacra publica* of Carthage. The religious calendar now included festivals to selected native cults (called *civitas*, municipal) as well as festivals to Roman and imperial cults (called *pagus*). Because the *ordo* of Carthago was a local body, acting in the interests of its own local agenda, the *sacra publica* of Carthage were unique to Carthage⁷.

The second filter we need to apply is Tertullian's social standing (educated middle class, but not elite). There were different cults for different classes, as well as cults for married men and other cults for single men, and so on⁸. Five things relevant to this paper may be deduced from Tertullian's writings.

(1) Tertullian belonged by birth and upbringing to a reasonably wealthy middle-class home⁹.

(2) Tertullian was brought up in a pagan home. The opening words of *de paenitentia* are one of his few autobiographical statements – 'men who are as we ourselves once were, blind and unenlightened by the Lord' – and again in the *apologeticus*, 'we too laughed in times past [at the resurrection]. We are from your own ranks'¹⁰. Other writings describe the tutelary deities in his home life. Starting with Consevius, who presided over conception, and Fluviona, who preserved growth in the womb, Tertullian named thirty-eight separate deities who (he believed before his conversion) had supervised his development¹¹. At school, the letters of the alphabet were memorised by chanting the names of pagan gods.

(3) Tertullian was born into African provincial stock – he called himself *Poenicum inter Romanos* and he was proud of his ancestry. 'Tertullian's Punic blood palpably pulsates in his style, with its archaisms or provincialisms, its glowing imagery, its passionate temper'¹².

(4) Tertullian received a liberal education, which paid special attention to the gods and goddesses of the Graeco-Roman pantheon. The Christian Tertullian pondered whether Christian parents should send their children to pagan schools. He recommended that they should, or the children would grow up illiterate, but Christian teaching at home was essential to counter the earnestness

⁶ Rives, *Religion and Authority*, pp. 13, 39-42, 51, 61-3, 76, 80, 96-8; Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, pp. 15-17.

⁷ Rives, *Religion and Authority*, p. 170.

⁸ Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, pp. 12-13.

⁹ *apologeticus* 7 and *ad nationes*, 1.7.15 (domestic servants); *de cultus feminarum* 2.5.4 (our slaves); *adversus Valentianos* 3.3 (nurse).

¹⁰ *de paenitentia* 1.1; *apologeticus* 18.4.

¹¹ *ad nationes* 2.11.1-12.

¹² *de pallio* 2.1; Schaff's *Encyclopaedia*. Internet edition, 'Tertullian', p. 1.

with which the *grammaticus* taught the class to worship the traditional gods¹³.

(5) Tertullian was not a member of the elite, the *ordo decurionum* (order of decurions), which controlled the *sacra publica* at Carthage. Numbering 100 wealthy and influential men over the age of twenty-five, it controlled not only the religious life of the city – the dates of festivals, sacrifices, new cults, new temples, and so on – but also the city's public finances and buildings and public business in general⁴.

The third filter is to concentrate on the second half of the second century CE, but no earlier. Until the second century, the Romans who ruled Carthage regarded themselves as Roman citizens who had made Carthage their home. They were, and wanted to be, an island of Roman culture in a sea of Berbers and Punics, who worshipped their own gods in a separate forum from the one where Romans worshipped. The *ordo* promoted both, but it promoted them separately¹⁵.

However, as the descendants of the Roman colonists began to identify with the land where they lived, they invited Berbers (the original inhabitants of the area) and Punics (the descendants of the Phoenician immigrants) to join them in the *ordo*. Berbers and Punics responded enthusiastically, and public religion in Carthage changed out of all recognition. The practices of three previously disparate groups substantially converged during the second half of the second century, so we cannot seek for Tertullian's religious beliefs only in the devotions of a Punic family. By the time he was growing up, the *ordo* was promoting a collective religious identity that embraced all three traditions¹⁶.

So what were Tertullian's religious beliefs before his conversion, defining religious beliefs as 'belief in Spiritual Beings'¹⁷? They may be explored in three stages.

1. Where Tertullian worshipped

'No place is completely free from idols', he wrote in *de spectaculis*¹⁸, but Tertullian mentioned four particular places which he had frequented before his conversion.

¹³ *de idololatria* 10.1, 4-6; C.B. Daly, 'Tertullian on Roman Education', *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record* 89 (1958), 14-23.

¹⁴ Margaret M. Baney, *Some Reflections of Life in the Writings of Tertullian* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1948), pp. 122-3; Rives, *Religion and Authority*, pp. 32-3, 38, 51, 113, 185.

¹⁵ Rives, *Religion and Authority*, pp. 61-2, 158, 176.

¹⁶ Rives, *Religion and Authority*, pp. 51, 70, 114, 117, 152-3, 161-5, 250; Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, pp. 40-1.

¹⁷ E.B. Taylor, *Primitive Culture*, 6th edn., 2 vols. (London, 1920), 1, 424, suggests 'belief in Spiritual Beings' as the 'minimum definition of Religion'.

¹⁸ *de spectaculis* 8.9.

The Byrsa. Public life was centred on this acropolis, which dominated central Carthage. Reading parts of *de idololatria* is like walking with Tertullian through the Byrsa, seeing idolatry in every shop, temple, altar, and plaza. Clearly Tertullian had celebrated the festivals he mentions here, the Saturnalia, the New Year and Midwinter festivals, the Feast of Matrons, and many more, so vividly does he describe them¹⁹.

The Amphitheatre. Tertullian described at first hand the processions and gladiatorial fights and sacrifices in the amphitheatre on the north-west of the city. 'We have laughed ...'; 'we once saw ...'; 'we watched ...'. It was, he said as a Christian, essentially one huge heathen temple, with its 'wretched business of incense and blood'²⁰.

The Circus (stadium), on the west edge of the city. Chariot and foot racing, jumping and wrestling were held here, and Tertullian the Christian remembered the altar at the goal posts, where sacrifices were offered, the processions of idols, the temple to the sun in the middle, and the numerous ornaments dedicated to pagan deities²¹.

Theatres. On the opposite side of the city, Carthage had two theatres, to which Tertullian later objected, partly because of the immodesty and immorality of the plays, but primarily because the plays acknowledged pagan gods, as he himself had formerly done. 'No one is able to describe all the details at full length except one who is still in the habit of going to the shows. I myself prefer to leave the picture incomplete rather than to recall it'²².

2. How Tertullian worshipped

We may reasonably assume that he had participated in eight aspects of pagan worship, which he later condemned.

- *Burning incense* at shrines and altars was one of the simplest ways to worship pagan deities – done so easily that some Christians did not see it as idolatry²³.
- *Libations.* Even to hand the wine to the person who was sacrificing was, Tertullian warned, to participate in the worship of the deity in question²⁴.

¹⁹ *de idololatria*, 14.6; Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, pp. 40; Rives, *Religion and Authority*, pp. 23, 27, 40, 44, 61-2, 156.

²⁰ *ad nationes* 1.10.47; *apologeticus* 15.1, 5-6; *de spectaculis* 11.1-2, 12.7, 21.3; Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, p. 40.

²¹ *de spectaculis* 5.7, 7.2-5, 8.1, 8.3-4, 9.2-5, 18.3, 21.2; Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, p. 40; Rives, *Religion and Authority*, p. 27.

²² *apologeticus* 15.1-2; *de spectaculis*, 10.2-5, 17.1-7, 19.5 (quotation), 21.2; Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, p. 40.

²³ *de idololatria* 2.2, 11.6.

²⁴ *de idololatria* 17.1.

- *Animal sacrifices*. 'Blood and smoke and fetid, burning heaps of animal flesh', as Tertullian described animal sacrifices to the gods, were of fundamental importance in pagan Carthage²⁵.
- *Prayers*. In his exposition of the Lord's Prayer, Tertullian made passing references to the part which prayer played in pagan worship²⁶.
- *Garlands*. On feast days, Tertullian's school had been wreathed with flowers; decorating houses and temples and public buildings was an important part of pagan worship. Christians were conspicuous by their refusal to hang out garlands on these occasions²⁷.
- *Feasts* in honour of the gods were an integral part of the school curriculum and continued throughout adult life. Tertullian acidly commented, 'Wantonness and drunkenness are there, since pagan festivals are mostly frequented for the sake of food and drink and lust'²⁸.
- *Mutual oaths* to pagan deities often finalised business deals. Tertullian suggested that pagans, anxious to do business with Christians, might be prepared to conclude the deal without requiring the Christian actually to name the god. Clearly Tertullian, before his conversion, had acknowledged the required deities as a normal routine of life²⁹.
- *Private cults*. In cosmopolitan Carthage, public cults were supplemented by many private religious groupings, ethnic groups, trade groups, and many more³⁰. Tertullian gives little detail about them except for the cult of Mithras, which he mentions three times. Whether he knew it as a personal experience has been much debated, and time precludes pursuing the question here³¹.

3. What Tertullian believed

A resident of Carthage, in the second half of the second century, did not need to *believe* anything, so long as he or she conformed outwardly with the *sacra publica* laid down by the *ordo*. People who were sceptical in their hearts could and did offer sacrifices to the community gods, and throw incense on the flame to honour the emperor³². So what did Tertullian believe? I offer three suggestions.

First, it is hard to imagine anyone of Tertullian's sincerity, conviction, and passion attending sacrifices, throwing incense, and pouring libations (as he

²⁵ *apologeticus* 23.14; *de idololatria* 2.2.

²⁶ E.g., *de oratione* 15.2.

²⁷ *apologeticus* 35.4; *de idololatria* 10.4.

²⁸ *de idololatria* 1.4 (quotation), 10.1 (school feasts).

²⁹ *de idololatria* 23.1-7.

³⁰ Rives, *Religion and Authority*, pp. 12, 110, 172, 184-6, 192, 204, 214.

³¹ *de corona* 15.3-4; *de praescriptione* 40.4; *adversus Marcionem* 1.13.5.

³² *apologeticus* 10.1, 35.1-7.

undoubtedly did) without believing, at least initially, in their efficacy. Pierre de Labriolle suggested that '[Tertullian's] horror of paganism, even where it was least open to blame, might have proceeded from his hatred of a past, whereof he felt in himself the re-awakenings'³³. What Tertullian avoided as a Christian may be a good description of his religious beliefs before his conversion. When he recollected that at the games 'his mind (was) raised and his soul (was) stirred', he is clearly telling us that he was a passionate, not a detached, observer of the festivities³⁴.

Secondly, Tertullian, as *Poenicum inter Romanos*, had a particular interest in the Punic gods of Carthage, whose celebrations included:

- the festival to Aesculapius, the grandest of the Carthaginian festivals, when priests led a procession and then performed public animal sacrifices, followed by days of theatrical events and gladiatorial contests, culminating in chariot races in the Circus³⁵;
- the festivities for Caelestis, originally the Punic goddess Tanit, now the patron native goddess of Carthage³⁶; and
- the games to Ceres from 12 to 19 April – Ceres, whose devotees' virginity he held up as an example to Christians³⁷.

Thirdly, in Tertullian's classical education, philosophers exercised more spiritual influence than the priests of Carthaginian religion. Which of them most attracted Tertullian has been widely debated, but he so often agreed with Seneca that he once called him *saepe noster*³⁸. Seneca wrote, 'God is near you, he is with you, he is within you ... [A] holy spirit indwells within us, one who marks our good and bad deeds, and is our guardian'³⁹. A singular God; a singular guardian. Had Tertullian already come to believe in one supreme deity, superior to the plethora of lesser deities, the gods of Cathage, before he gave his allegiance to the *deus Christianorum*?⁴⁰

³³ Pierre de Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius*, tr. Herbert Wilson (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1924), p. 61.

³⁴ *de spectaculis* 15.6.

³⁵ *de anima* 1.6; *apologeticus* 14.5, 23.6, 46.5; *de corona* 8.2; *de idololatria* 20.2; *ad nationes* 2.2.12, 2.14.14; *de pallio* 1.2, 4.10; *de testimonio animae* 2.7; Rives, *Religion and Authority*, pp. 154-6, 181-3.

³⁶ *apologeticus* 12.4, 23.6, 24.7; *ad nationes* 2.8; Rives, *Religion and Authority*, pp. 65-9, 162-9.

³⁷ *apologeticus* 11.6, 13.9, 16.6; *de exhortatione castitatis* 13.2; *ad nationes* 1.12.3, 2.7.15; *de pallio* 4.10; *de spectaculis* 6.2; *de testimonio animae* 2.7; *ad uxorem* 1.6.4; Rives, *Religion and Authority*, pp. 155-8.

³⁸ *de anima* 20.1.

³⁹ Seneca, *Epistle 41.1* (tr. Richard M. Gummere, LCL (1917)).

⁴⁰ Space prohibits a full list of recent works analysing the factors which led to Tertullian's conversion but three major ones are Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 274; Jean Claude Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1972), pp. 410-85; and Johannes Klein, *Tertullian: Christliche Bewusstseins und sittliche Forderungen* (Hildesheim: H.A. Gerstenberg, 1975 [Dusseldorf, 1940]), pp. 470-8.