

Tertullian's Enduring Question

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The Editor

What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens," asked Tertullian in memorable, bitingly eloquent, words:

the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? Our principles come from the Porch of Solomon, who himself taught that the Lord is to be sought in simplicity of heart. I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic or a dialectic [i.e., Aristotelian] Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel, no need of research. Once we come to believe, we have no desire to believe anything else; for the first article of our faith is that there is nothing else we have to believe. (*Prescriptions against Heretics* 7)

Tertullian's aim, in his *Prescriptions against Heretics* was to persuade his readers to stay away from heresies. Just before the passage quoted he had been inquiring into the root of these "doctrines of men and of daemons." Philosophy is the root—that repository of "worldly wisdom, that rash interpreter of the divine nature and order." Heretics are "equipped by philosophy." "From philosophy come those fables, those endless genealogies and fruitless questionings, those words that spread like cancer," which we find in the heretics. Heresies are "generated for itching ears by the ingenuity of that worldly wisdom which the Lord called foolishness . . ." Lift a heretic and you'll find a philosopher.

It was to hold us back from the futile and deceiving speculations of the heretics, says Tertullian, that the apostle Paul "testified expressly in his letter to the Colossians that we should beware of philosophy. 'Take heed lest anyone beguile you through philosophy or vain deceit, after the tradition of men,' against the providence of the Holy Spirit. Paul had been at Athens, and in his argumentative encounters there had become acquainted with that human wisdom of the philosophers which attacks and perverts truth, being itself divided up into its own swarm of heresies by its mutually antagonistic sects."

Having located the root of heresy in philosophy, Tertullian then poses his rhetorical question: "What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic?" Be done, he says, with Stoicized Christianity, with Platonized Christianity, with dialectic Christianity. Were Tertullian living in our own day his list would be much longer: be done with Kantianized Christianity, with Hegelianized Christianity, with deconstructionist Christianity. Be done with them all. The stance of the Christian toward all attempts at "worldly wisdom" must be unrelenting opposition:

Would to God that no "heresies had ever been necessary in order that those who are approved may be made manifest!" We would then never be required to try our strength in contests about the soul with philosophers, those patriarchs of heretics, as they may fairly be called. The apostle Paul already foresaw the ensuing conflicts between philosophy and the truth. He offered his warning about philosophy after he had been at Athens, had become acquainted with that loquacious city, and had

Old arguments find renewed relevance in Professor Wolterstorff's eloquent exposition: What should Christians expect of non-Christian texts? What question could matter more to the church-related college?

there gotten a taste of its huckstering wiseacres and talkers. . . It will be for Christians to clear away those noxious vapors, exhaled from philosophy, which obscure the clear and wholesome atmosphere of truth. They will do so both by shattering to pieces the arguments which are drawn from the principles of things—meaning those of the philosophers—and by opposing to them the maxims of heavenly wisdom—that is, such as are revealed by the Lord; in order that both the pitfalls with which philosophy captivates the heathen may be removed, and the means employed by heresy to shake the faith of Christians may be destroyed. (*On the Soul* 3)

There is danger confronting those Christians who set out to shatter the arguments of the philosophers: they may themselves be seduced by those arguments and become heretics. The danger cannot be avoided; some in the community must oppose heresy by uncovering its roots in philosophy and then attacking that. But to those who suggest that a training in philosophy should become a more or less standard part of the education of Christians, Tertullian's answer is unequivocal—as indeed are most of his answers to most of his questions! Addressing the soul, he says:

I call you not as one formed in the schools, trained in the libraries, nourished in the Attic academies and porticoes, belching forth wisdom. I address you simple, unskilled, uncultured and untaught, as those are who have you and nothing else; I address you as a person of the road, the square, the workshop, that alone. I want your inexperience, since no one of small experience feels any confidence. I demand of you that you consult only the things you bring with you as a human being, the things you know either from yourself or from your author, whoever that may be.

Tertullian's question, "What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?" remains as much alive today as it was in 198 A.D. when Tertullian posed it. It's not one of those questions which the Christian community has settled and from there gone on to other matters. It remains an enduring question for the Christian academic. It is, in fact, *the* enduring question: what does the Christian gospel have to do with the enterprise of scholarship—in particular, with the scholarship of those who are not Christian?

The question would not have endured if Tertullian's answer, or some alternative, had been universally accepted. It would now be of interest only to antiquarians. In proclaiming that Jerusalem's business with Athens is combatting those philosophies spawned by Athens which inspire the heretics who disturb the church, Tertullian was staking out a position within a multifaceted debate which agitated the ancient church. In particular, he was staking out a position in opposition to that articulated by his near-contemporary, Clement of Alexandria. I think that you and I, at the dawn of the third millennium after Christ, can still learn something by reflecting on that debate conducted by our forebears in the faith.

The picture presented by the passages from Tertullian which I have cited is unremittingly that of *disjunction* and *opposition*. Between pagan philosophy and Holy Scripture there is no choice but to choose. "Choose ye this day whom you will serve." To be a Christian is already to have chosen. The Christian lives by Holy Scripture, in opposition to pagan philosophy. To the suggestion that some Christians should advance beyond their acceptance of Holy Scripture to engage in philosophical speculation, Tertullian's answer is crisp: "After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel, no need of research. When we come to believe, we have no desire to believe anything else; for the first article of our faith is that there is nothing else we have to believe."

There were those, Clement included, who were citing the New Testament injunction, "Seek, and you shall find," to justify the project of becoming learned Christians. Tertullian's answer is eloquently dismissive:

The reasonable exegesis of this saying turns on three points: matter, time, and limitation. As to matter, you are to consider what is to be sought; as to time, when; and as to limitation, how far. What you must seek is what Christ taught, and precisely as long as you have not found it, precisely until you do find it. And you found it when you came to believe. You would not have believed if you had not found, just as you would not have sought except in order to find. Since finding was the object of your search, and belief the result of your finding, your acceptance of the faith bars any prolonging of seeking and finding. The very success of your seeking has set up this limitation for you.

Your boundary has been marked out by him who would not have you believe, and so would not have you seek, outside the limits of his teaching.

If we were bound to go on seeking as long as there is any possibility of finding, simply because so much has been taught by others as well, we would always be seeking and never believing . . .

I have no patience with the man who is always seeking, for he will never find. He is seeking where there will be no finding. I have no patience with the man who is always knocking, for the door will never be opened. He is knocking at an empty house. I have no patience with the man who is always asking, for he will never be heard. He is asking one who does not hear . . .

But even supposing that we ought to be seeking now and ever, where should we seek? Among the heretics, where everything is strange and hostile to our truth? . . . Instruction and destruction never reach us from the same quarter. Light and darkness never come from the same source. So let us seek in our own territory, from our own friends and on our own business, and let us seek only what can come into question without disloyalty to the Rule of Faith. (*Prescriptions against Heretics* 10-12)

If we are to see the full pattern of Tertullian's thought, we must understand the import of those final cryptic words. With rhetoric of hammering force, Tertullian has been arguing that it is incoherent to suggest that Christians should engage in "seeking the truth." To be a Christian is to accept the teachings of Scripture; in and by accepting those teachings, one ends one's search for the truth. And as to the more specific suggestion that, in seeking the truth, Christians should not neglect to look into the pagan philosophers, Tertullian's response is that this is not only incoherent, but altogether futile and muddle-headed.

It was not Tertullian's position, however, that Christians are to refrain from all forms of intellectual endeavor; he was not an exponent of bare faith alone. His own writing is evidence to the contrary. It is appropriate for Christians to try both to understand better *what already they believe* and to defend that with intelligence. Provided you honor the Rule of Faith, says Tertullian to his fellow Christians, you may "seek and discuss as much as you please, and pour forth your whole desire for curious inquiry if any point seems to you undetermined through ambiguity, or obscure from want of clarity. There is surely some brother, a teacher gifted with the grace of knowledge, someone among those skilled intimates of yours," who can assist you in this, while steering you away from inquiries that stray from the Rule of Faith (*Prescriptions* 14).

§ 2. The picture drawn by Clement was unmistakably different. For Clement, the fundamental relation of Christianity to pagan philosophy was not *opposition* but *supersession*. Pagan philosophy is not *anti-Christian* but *sub-Christian*. Or to speak more historically: just as the law and the prophets served for the Hebrews as a preparation for Christ, so philosophy prepared the Greeks. In Clement's own words: "philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, until the Lord should call the Greeks. For this was a schoolmaster to bring the Hellenic mind, as was the law, the Hebrews, to Christ. Philosophy, therefore, was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ" (*Stromata* I,5). Using a different cluster of metaphors to make the same point, Clement says that philosophy "was given to the Greeks as a covenant peculiar to them—being, as it is, a steppingstone to the philosophy which is according to Christ" (*Stromata* VI,8).

As his words suggest, Clement's reason for embracing this positive picture of Greek philosophy was, at bottom, theological. Sometimes he appeals to the general principle that, according to the teaching of Scripture, all that is good comes from God. Since it seemed obvious to him that there was truth in Greek philosophy, he drew the conclusion that Greek philosophy, insofar as it has a grasp of the truth, comes from God. In other passages, thinking not about the good in general but about truth, Clement appeals to his understanding of what the prologue to the Gospel of John teaches about Logos. Having described Logos, in verse 9, as "the true light that enlightens every man," John goes on in verse 14 to say that Logos "became flesh and dwelt among us." The conclusion Clement drew was that that very same Logos which became incarnate in Jesus Christ is at work in all humanity leading them toward truth. This is how he puts the point in one passage: "into all human beings whatsoever, but especially those who are occupied with intellectual pursuits, a certain divine effluence has been instilled; wherefore, even if reluctantly, they confess that God is one,

indestructible, unbegotten, and that somewhere above in the tracts of heaven, in His own peculiar appropriate eminence, He has an existence true and eternal from whence He surveys all things" (*Exhortation VI*). There were those in Clement's day who said that it was through *human understanding* that philosophy was discovered by the Greeks. Clement rebukes them: "I find the Scriptures saying that understanding is sent by God" (*Stromata VI,8*).

One version of the supersessionist view would be that Christianity has so far superseded its two main antecedents, Hebrew revelation and Greek philosophy, that there is no longer any point in paying attention to those superseded antecedents. That was not Clement's version. Beyond a doubt "the teaching which is according to the Savior is complete in itself and without defect," he says, "being 'the power and wisdom of God'; the addition of Greek philosophy does not make the truth more powerful." Or to put it the other way round: the absence of Greek philosophy would not render the perfect Word incomplete, it would not cause the Truth to perish (*Stromata I,20*). Nonetheless, the study of Greek philosophy remains of great utility for Christians.

For one thing, it is useful for warding off heresy and sophistry. The learned Christian "can distinguish sophistry from philosophy . . . rhetoric from dialectics, and the various sects of barbarian philosophy from the truth itself. How necessary, then, is it for him to who desires to be partaker of the power of God to treat of intellectual subjects by philosophising!" The philosophically learned Christian, "a man of much counsel, is like the Lydian touchstone, which is believed to possess the power of distinguishing spurious from genuine gold" (*Stromata I,9*). Alluding to the Tertullianists of his day, Clement observes that "some, who think themselves naturally gifted, do not wish to touch either philosophy or logic; nay more, they do not wish to learn natural science. They demand bare faith alone, as if they wished, without bestowing any care on the vine, right away to begin gathering clusters. (Tertullian, as we saw above, does not "demand bare faith alone" of all Christians.) Now the Lord is figuratively described as the vine from which, accordingly to the word, we are to take pains to gather fruit with the art of husbandry." In husbandry "we lop, dig, bind, and perform other operations . . . So also here, I call him truly learned who brings everything to bear on the truth; so that, from geometry, music, grammar, and philosophy itself, culling what is useful, he guards the faith against assault" (*Stromata I,9*).

It is clear, however, that Clement did not regard the utility for apologetics of the study of Greek philosophy as exhausting its serviceability for Christians. Indeed, that for him was not its most important use. Though the truth proclaimed by our Savior is the truth necessary and sufficient for salvation, it is not the whole of truth. It is then the calling of Christian intellectuals to go beyond apologetics and incorporate the truth proclaimed by Christ into a larger picture—a more comprehensive "philosophy," if you will. For this purpose, the learned Christian takes fragments of truth from wherever he finds them. Truth as such is the one ever-living Logos. The various sects of barbarian and Hellenic philosophy each vaunts itself as having got hold of that whole truth. In actual fact, however, none has done more than tear off a fragment. Yet "the parts, though differing from each other, preserve their relation to the whole . . . Be assured, then, that he who brings the separate fragments together and makes them one again will contemplate the perfect Word, the truth" (*Stromata I,13*). "The way of truth is one. But into it, as into a perennial river, streams flow from all sides" (*Stromata I,5*).

§3. Disjunction or supersession, opposition or incorporation. Who was right about the relation of Christianity to pagan learning? And who was right about the Christian intellectual? Does the Christian intellectual study the learning of non-Christians solely to discern the error of its ways, confining the scope of his own positive inquiries to the content of the faith itself? Or does the Christian intellectual, convinced that Logos has dispensed portions of truth to all humanity, study such learning not only to discern the error of its ways but also to harvest such fragments of truth as are to be found there, with the goal of combining those, along with the more clear, ample, and fundamental truths of the Gospel, into a larger synthesis?

You will have discerned that the dispute between Clement and Tertullian was a multifaceted

dispute: a *cluster* of issues was under discussion, not just one issue. From that cluster I have time, on this occasion, to pick out just one for discussion—one of the most important, however, namely this: how should Christians interpret pagan literature and philosophy? What should be their goal and strategy of interpretation? Or more generally: how should one interpret the textual tradition which one has inherited? Clement espoused one goal and strategy, Tertullian, another. Neither party won the debate in the second century; neither party has won the debate to this day.

Though Clement believed firmly that, as the consequence of the activity of Logos, there is truth to be found in the Greek philosophers, he did not deny that the truth to be found there is mingled with falsehood. Neither did he deny—indeed, he ardently affirmed—that something decisively new had taken place in world history when the Logos which enlightens all who come into the world was enfleshed in Jesus Christ. Unlike every philosophy, be it Greek or barbarian, the teaching of Jesus “is complete in itself and without defect, being the ‘power and wisdom of God.’” Accordingly, when confronted with the teaching of some philosopher which contradicts the teaching of our Savior, the Christian does not spend time mulling over which to accept. Everything incompatible with the teaching of our Savior is in error; none of it is a fragment of the truth. Clement was not Hegel born out of season. History is not a vast ongoing series of supersessions, continuing until such time as *Geist* is fully manifested in the abstract thought of some philosopher. Though Christianity supersedes both Hebrew revelation and Greek philosophy, nothing will supersede Christianity. Our Savior did not teach us the *whole* of truth; he did teach us nothing but truth; there was no falsehood mingled in. And the truth he taught us is the most important truth, taught with a clarity never to be superseded in this present existence. The teaching of our Savior is thus a touchstone for the Christian interpreter.

Just as Clement did not deny that the truth to be found in the Greek philosophers is mingled with abundant error, and either of secondary importance or lacking in full clarity, so too he did not deny that the Greek philosophers, unlike our Savior, exhibited a multitude of vices. The most fundamental of their vices was that they were, in Clement’s words, “thieves and robbers.” Echoing the then-current view that the Greek philosophers had somehow gained direct access to Hebrew prophecy, Clement says that “before the coming of the Lord they received fragments of the truth from the Hebrew prophets, though admittedly not with full knowledge, and they claimed these as their own teachings, disguising some points, and treating others sophistically by their ingenuity” (*Stromata* I,17). Nonetheless, Clement insists that “sentence of condemnation is not ignorantly to be pronounced against *what is said* on account of *him who says it* (a point also to be kept in view in the case of those who are now alleged to prophesy); rather, *what is said* must be scrutinized to see if it conforms to the truth” (*Stromata* VI,8).

There is, thus, a definite sobriety about the Christian intellectual of Clementine persuasion as he interprets the Greek philosophers. He does not place them on a pedestal; he recognizes their moral failings. He does not idolize them as the fount of all and only wisdom and clarity; he recognizes that such truth as they grasped is either of secondary importance or but a hazy and hesitant apprehension of what our Savior taught us. Nonetheless, there’s truth in the Greek philosophers—truth even about God. And the Christian intellectual interprets principally for that truth, so as to incorporate it within a larger synthesis. The Christian interpreter notes, for example, that because of the “divine effluence” at work in the Greek philosophers, they correctly “teach, even if reluctantly, that God is one, indestructible, unbegotten,” and so forth (*Exhortation* VI).

Anybody who takes in hand Aquinas’ *Summa theologiae* will at once discern Clementine hermeneutics at work. Having posed a question—for example, “Whether the Existence of God is Self-Evident?”—Aquinas opens his treatment by citing objections to the answer for which he will argue. These objections almost always are, or incorporate, citations from the tradition. Having stated objections from the tradition to his thesis, Aquinas then announces “On the contrary:” and as the introduction to his own argumentation he cites a passage from the tradition which is on his side in the dispute. Finally, after he has laid out his own argument for the answer he prefers, he returns to the opening objections. Though on a few occasions he pronounces an objection mistaken, almost

always he instead argues that what was cited as an objection need not be, and indeed, *should not* be, so interpreted. When appropriate clarifications, qualifications, and distinctions are made, what appeared to be an objection is seen instead to be getting at an aspect of the full and complex truth.

The strategy, as I say, is clearly Clementine. Though there are indisputably errors in the textual tradition bequeathed to us, nonetheless the bulk of that tradition presents to us a finely articulated apprehension of the truth. And rather than dwelling on the errors, Aquinas regards his interpretative task and challenge to be discerning that particular facet of the truth which is presented by the text at hand, thereby showing how that text properly interpreted fits together with other texts which might have been supposed to contradict it. In thus interpreting the textual tradition, Aquinas typifies the medieval tradition in general; the medieval Western tradition was dominantly Clementine in its interpretative practice.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in our own day, has argued for recovering the Clementine tradition—though I am not aware of his anywhere calling attention to the Clementine ancestry of the interpretative strategy which he defends. (He does call attention to its medieval ancestry.) Confronted with a text, the initial goal of the interpreter, so Gadamer argues, should be to interpret so that what the text says on the subject (*Sache*) under discussion turns out true. Only if that goal is frustrated, only if there is no reasonable way of interpreting the text so that it comes out true, should we interpret for the opinion of the author on the subject under discussion. The strategy of interpreting for authorial opinion is legitimate only as a fall-back. Here is what Gadamer says in one passage:

Just as the recipient of a letter understands the news that it contains and first sees things with the eyes of the person who wrote the letter—i.e., considers what he writes as true, and is not trying to understand the writer's peculiar opinions as such—so also do we understand traditional texts on the basis of expectations of meaning drawn from our own prior relation to the subject matter. And just as we believe the news reported by a correspondent because he was present or is better informed, so too are we fundamentally open to the possibility that the writer of a transmitted text is better informed than we are, with our prior opinion. It is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to 'understand' the text, psychologically or historically, as another's opinion. (*Truth and Method*, second revised edition, p. 294)

§4. My claim that the medievals, for the most part, practiced the Clementine strategy of interpretation, combined with my description of Gadamer as arguing for "recovering" the Clementine strategy, suggests that somewhere along the line the Clementine strategy went into decline. And so it did. But before we get to that, let me return to the second century to characterize Tertullian's alternative strategy of interpretation.

Contrary to what one might have expected, Tertullian did not deny that there is truth to be found in the Greek philosophers. It's definitely a concession on his part rather than an emphasis; and he doesn't do anything with the concession. Yet there it is. In his *Apology* he says, for example:

We have already said that God fashioned this whole world by His word, His reason, His power. Even your own philosophers agree that *logos*, that is, Word and Reason, seems to be the maker of the universe. This *logos* Zeno defines as the maker who formed everything according to a certain arrangement; the same *logos* (he says) is called Destiny, God, the Mind of Jupiter, and the inevitable Fate of all things. Cleanthes combines all these predicates into Spirit, which, according to him, permeates the universe. Moreover, we, too, ascribe Spirit as its proper substance to that Word, Reason, and Power by which, as we have said, God made everything. (*Apology* 21)

But if this is Tertullian's conviction, why are disjunction and opposition the themes of his interpretative strategy? Why not, as with Clement, supersession and incorporation?

Tertullian is less explicit on the matter than one would like. Nonetheless, I think one can see how he was thinking. Whereas Clement urged his readers to forget about the persons who are philosophers and concentrate on extracting what is true from what they taught, Tertullian had his eye on the very thing that Clement urged his readers to overlook—the *particular philosophers themselves*, and the distinctives of their patterns of thought in which the particularities of their allegiances, convictions, characters, and so forth get expressed.

When we have the full pattern of Plato's thought in view—or Aristotle's, or some Stoic's—and then compare it with the full pattern of the Rule of Faith, what leaps out is *difference*. Plato's thought, in its distinctive totality, is not a hazy and hesitant adumbration of what finally becomes clear in the Christian Rule of Faith—along with fragments of truth which can nicely be synthesized with the Rule. Plato's thought in its totality has a contour of its own; it has its own integrity. It's not a patternless assemblage of fragments. As such, his thought is not *sub-Christian* but *anti-Christian*. Be it granted that the Christian discerns that here and there Plato is hazily and haltingly getting at something which is stated with clarity and affirmed with confidence in the Gospel. Be it granted that the Christian here and there discerns fragments susceptible to being synthesized into a larger Christian philosophy. But to approach Plato thus is to ignore the integrity of his thought. Let Plato be Plato, rather than a failed approach to Christianity. And let Christ be Christ.

Tertullian was clearly suggesting that we cannot account for the fact that the full pattern of Plato's thought is different from that of the Gospel solely by observing that the Logos dispenses its illumination more fully in Christ than in the minds of the Greek philosophers. Perhaps it does. But human beings are not passive recipients of shafts of illumination thrown off by Logos. In the construction of learning there's always a self at work. What goes a long way toward accounting for the difference between Platonic thought in its integrity—or Stoic, or Aristotelian—and Christian, is that pagan selves are different selves from the Christian self: different allegiances, different commitments, different loves, different orientations, different virtues. Further, the ways in which pagan selves are different from the Christian self are not *in addition to* their thought; those differences *shape* their thought. It's with his eye on the differences of pagan selves from the Christian self that Tertullian asks, "where is there any likeness between the Christian and the philosopher? between the disciple of Greece and the disciple of heaven? between the man whose object is fame and the man whose object is life? between the talker and the doer? between the man who builds up and the man who pulls down? between friends of error and foes of error? between one who corrupts the truth and one who restores and teaches the truth? between truth's thief and truth's custodian?" (*Apology* 46).

Some might reply that the first of each of these disjunctions is scarcely fair and accurate as a description of all Greek philosophers—not of Socrates, for example. Maybe not. Nonetheless, says Tertullian, "who can know truth without the help of God? Who can know God without Christ? Who has ever discovered Christ without the Holy Spirit? And who has ever received the Holy Spirit without the gift of faith? Socrates, as none can doubt, was guided by a different spirit—his daemon" (*On the Soul* 1).

To most of us, the Clementine strategy of interpretation practiced by the medievals seems very strange. And not only strange. It seems to us that the integrity of author and text are violated when one interprets with the aim of fitting all texts together into some grand synthesis. Aristotle was not just supplementing Plato, Nietzsche was not just complementing Pascal. Each was a unique person working out a unique pattern of thought and expression. You and I relish the inscapes of each of those unique patterns of thought and expression, and the differences among those inscapes. So much is this the case that it has become common practice in this century even to resist trying to interpret the various texts of a *single author* so that they constitute a unity—indeed, to resist trying to interpret *single texts* of an author so that they constitute a unity. Where once upon a time interpreters unquestioningly accepted the challenge to show how the various Aristotelian texts fit together, Werner Jaeger taught us instead to acknowledge dissonance within the Aristotelian corpus, the explanation offered being that Aristotle's texts, written across the span of his career, represent stages in his struggle to free himself from the intellectual grip of Plato. And where once upon a time interpreters struggled mightily to extract a unified teaching from Kant's First Critique, Norman Kemp-Smith taught us instead to acknowledge dissonance within the First Critique, the explanation offered being that the Critique was written across a twenty-year stretch of time during which Kant was struggling to break free from his earlier metaphysical way of thinking into his new critical way of thinking.

Before the rise of deconstruction, in which Tertullianist interpretation goes berserk, it was, however, in biblical interpretation that one saw the Tertullianist strategy followed most relentlessly. Once upon a time the Bible was regarded as one book, containing a unified, inexhaustibly rich, body of teaching. Then it came to be seen not as God's one book but as an anthology of sixty-six human books—give or take a few depending on one's preferred canon. Not long thereafter, many of the books came in turn to be regarded as anthologies: deutero-Isaiah, trito-Isaiah, and so forth. And then these sub-anthologies came in turn to be regarded as anthologies of pericopes. An anthology of anthologies of anthologies, along with the traces of fumbling editorial efforts to blend these anthologies together.

I judge the Reformation to have been the principal, though certainly not the only, cause of the decline of Clementine, and the rise of Tertullianist, interpretation. The Reformers no longer regarded the texts they inherited, excepting a few unalleviatedly heretical texts, as all together embodying a finely articulated, highly complex, body of truth, it being the task and challenge of the interpreter to extract that truth by drawing the right distinctions, making explicit the tacit qualifications, properly disambiguating the ambiguities, honoring the inherent hierarchies of decisiveness, and so forth. To the contrary: the Reformers regarded the bulk of the texts they inherited as riddled with error. Best then to be done with them and return to the church fathers, and behind those, to God's own text, the Bible, in which there was no error at all.

But if the Reformation thus played a fundamental role in the great reversal of interpretative strategy, I judge it was the Romantic movement which secured the victory of the Tertullianist strategy of interpretation in the modern world. For it was the Romantics who taught us the importance of history, the dignity of the particular, and the organic unity of what is truly a text. It's because of our Romantic inheritance that you and I feel in our bones that Clementine interpretation, be it practiced on philosophical texts, biblical texts, or whatever, dishonors the authors and texts of the past, violating their integrity, by riding roughshod over their particularities in the concern to pluck out whatever can be incorporated into a vast synthesis in which everything has its own little place—that synthesis being constructed, of course, by ourselves. Clementine interpretation feels to us like an act of abusive arrogance.

§5. Revulsion is not reasoned objection, however. The question remains open: which goal and strategy of interpretation is right, the Clementine or the Tertulhanist? And in particular: how do you and I, as Christian intellectuals, interpret all those texts which are not Christian? Do we interpret them for what is true in what is said—now and then polemicizing against some of the errors we notice? Or—if we bother with them at all—do we interpret them for the particular contour of thought, allegiance, and sensibility there expressed? And if we do the latter, to what end? Do we follow Clement or Tertullian?

As preface to the answer I wish to propose, let me call your attention to one fundamental point of agreement between Clement and Tertullian. Perhaps you noticed that whereas I spoke of the goal of interpretation for Clement as discerning what is true in what the author said, I described the goal of interpretation which Gadamer espouses as trying to interpret the text as saying what is true. Those are very different goals—though the descriptions are closely similar. Clement first interprets the text, with the aim of discerning what the author said; then, interpretation finished, he sorts out the true from the false with his incorporationist goal in mind. Gadamer, by contrast, conducts interpretation itself in accord with the rule of trying to have the text turn out true on the matter under consideration. In this respect, Gadamer is closer to the medievals than the medievals were to Clement. Both Clement and Gadamer advocate what I called the "Clementine strategy of interpretation." Neither is much interested in what Gadamer calls the particular "opinions" of authors; both interpret for truth. But their way of getting there is very different; they represent different versions of the Clementine strategy. Clement, to say it again, *first* interprets for what is said and *then* looks for truth therein; Gadamer interprets *so as to have it come out true* and judges that to be what's said.

On this point there is full agreement between Clement and Tertullian; and I, in turn, agree with them. One *can* interpret a text with the aim in mind of having it come out true—or, be it noted, with the aim in mind of having it come out false, or boring, or interesting, or shocking, or bland, or disunited, or aesthetically satisfying—or whatever. Instead of construing a sentence literally, on which interpretation it may be bland, one can construe it metaphorically, on which interpretation it may be arresting; instead of construing it ironically, on which interpretation it may express an important truth, one can construe it literally, on which interpretation it may express a silly falsehood. And so forth. One can do this. But to interpret thus is to ignore the fact that texts are engagements among persons, in which one person performs an act of discourse and another tries to discern what act that was and to respond appropriately. If one insists on never doing anything else with texts than use them as occasions for engaging in one's own play of interpretation, on never using them to engage another human being over what she said, then one is—so it seems to me—in a profound way dishonoring that other human being. I insult you if, whenever you say something to me, I subject your words to a play of interpretation rather than attempting to discern what you said and to respond appropriately.

It may be said that one scarcely dishonors the person if one engages in Gadamerian interpretation—that is, engages in a play of interpretation with the goal in mind of having the words come out true. Isn't this, on the contrary, the most respectful of all modes of interpretation—more respectful than if I interpret for what you said, for your "opinion," which, after all, may or may not be true? I think not. You interpret my speech so as to have it come out true, and you succeed in that. But the truth which emerges is not what I said; it's not what I meant, not what I had in mind. Is that to respect *me*? I fail to see that it is. It's to display your own ingenuity as interpreter.

In short, I am a firm advocate of the priority of what I call "authorial-discourse interpretation." I concede the propriety on occasion of what I call "performance interpretation"—that is, interpretation of a text so as to have it come out true, or unified, or rife with aporia, or whatever. But authorial-discourse interpretation ought to have priority, as I describe more fully in my own 1995 work, *Divine Discourse*. To which it's worth adding that those who advocate performance interpretation regularly question interpretations of their own texts by insisting that interpreters have not grasped *what they said*.

So suppose we interpret texts for what the author or editor said, rather than so as to have them come out some way that we prefer. Should we who are Christians, when interpreting the texts of non-Christians, interpret so as to discern, and then appropriate, what's true in what is said, perhaps taking note along the way of errors, or should we interpret so as to grasp the particular contour of that person's thought, then noting its difference from the contour of Christian thought? Should we read Plato for what's true and to be appropriated in Plato, or for the distinct and alien contours of his thought?

My answer is: we should do both. Neither by itself is sufficient.

The first part of my reason is that there is both truth in what Plato thought, and a particular contour to his thought distinct from that of the Christian Gospel. Both are there, awaiting the interpreter's discovery.

The foundation of Clement's practice was his insistence that truth is not the exclusive possession of Christians—not even truth about God. Nobody is entirely blind to reality; most (maybe all) are not even blind to the reality of God. The Christian will no doubt feel that the non-Christian's apprehension of God is for the most part deficient in one way and another, and to one degree or another. She will not—not usually, anyway—find herself *learning* something about God that she didn't already know, or that she couldn't have known by reading biblical exegesis or Christian theology. But when it comes to other matters, she will often find herself genuinely learning things. I am myself hesitant to embrace Clement's explanation for all of this. Perhaps some of it is rightly ascribed to the Logos of which John speaks. But I would say that much of it is the outcome of the workings of the nature with which we human beings are endowed: our perceptual, rational, introspective, memorial nature. Either way, though, we are, of course, ultimately to ascribe truth to God.

On the other hand, Tertullian put his finger on something which Clement consistently overlooked or neglected. Plato's thought has a definite contour distinctively different from that of the Christian Gospel, a contour shaped not just by the way various experiences acted on various parts of his innate generic belief-forming nature, but by the way those experiences acted on the *blend* of Plato's innate generic nature with the contingent particularities of his allegiances, commitments, convictions, and so forth. It's not just our hard-wiring, but our hard-wiring plus our programming, that accounts for what we come to believe.

It was especially Augustine, among the church fathers, who emphasized and developed this point about the ways in which our particular contingent selves shape our learning. It led him to supplement Clement's motto, faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*), with the more complex motto, I believe in order to understand (*credo ut intelligam*). Faith not only seeks understanding; it is a condition of the understanding it seeks. A full exploration of what Augustine meant by this, and how he argued it, would require a lengthy paper by itself. Here it must suffice to say that it was Augustine's conviction that our affections—our loves and hates—have a profound impact on our understanding. If, for example, one loves some part of earthly reality in an idolatrous way, that will skew one's understanding of God and of God's relation to humanity and the world. It may even lead to one's denial of God. Augustine was convinced, accordingly, that the right ordering of the affections which faith secures is a condition of progressing in the understanding of God, and of reality generally.

To look at the full pattern of Plato's thought is to see a pattern of thought different from that of the Christian Gospel; that was Tertullian's point. To focus on what is true in Plato's thought is to see adumbrations of, and supplements to, the Christian Gospel; that was Clement's point. Both were right. What should be added is that often the pieces cannot be cleanly abstracted from the whole; what Plato meant by the piece is often bound up with the whole, and the whole isn't true. That's an implication of the Tertullianist point, that Plato's thought is not a mere assemblage of true and false items. On the Clementine side of the matter it's to be noticed, however, that in some such cases, though what Plato said is strictly false as he meant it, nonetheless, one can see what it was in reality that he *was trying to get at*. He had his eye on something real, though he didn't see it with full clarity nor describe it with full accuracy.

That was the first part of my argument for the conclusion that we need both Clementine and Tertullianist interpretation: what Clement had his eye on, and what Tertullian had his eye on, are both there. To establish that both are there is not yet, however, to establish that both should be of concern to the Christian scholar. Something more has to be said before we can draw that conclusion.

At this point Clement and Tertullian were, in my judgment, each partly right and partly wrong. Let me begin my unravelling by speaking of the *goal* of Christian learning, as distinguished from the *strategy*.

Tertullian believed that the positive goal of Christian learning does not extend beyond the attempt to deepen one's understanding of the Christian Gospel. It's worth noting that just as Augustine agreed with Tertullian that our affections and loyalties pervasively shape our learning, so too he agreed with Tertullian on this point. Augustine's mottos, *faith seeking understanding* and *I believe in order to understand*, are almost invariably understood by contemporary Christians as affirming the development of sociology in Christian perspective, psychology in Christian perspective, economics in Christian perspective, and so forth. They are almost invariably understood, in short, along Clementine lines. I think it decisively clear, however, that that is not how Augustine understood them. For Augustine, faith seeks to understand *that which already it believes*—a thoroughly Tertullianist point!

Never was this Tertullianist-Augustinian conviction formulated with greater precision and elegance than by that very Augustinian theologian Anselm, in his *Proslogium*. So rather than citing Augustine, let me cite Anselm. Before he sets out his proof for God's existence, Anselm addresses God with the words, "I long to understand in some degree thy truth, which my heart believes and

loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe—that unless I believed, I should not understand. And so, Lord, do thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as thou knowest it to be profitable, to understand that thou art as we believe; and that thou art that which we believe.” Then, the proof finished, Anselm again addresses God: “I thank thee, gracious Lord, I thank thee; because what I formerly believed by thy bounty, I now so understand by thine illumination, that if I were unwilling to believe that thou dost exist, I should not be able not to understand this to be true.”

To my claim that Augustine sided with Tertullian, and against Clement, on the positive goal of Christian learning, it might be replied that Augustine emphasizes, as Tertullian did not and Clement did, the utility of pagan learning for this project of faith seeking understanding. The famous passage from *On Christian Doctrine*, in which Augustine speaks of the Israelites appropriating the gold of the Egyptians, comes to mind. But Tertullian did not deny—as we have already seen—that there is truth in the pagan philosophers. More importantly, it is to be noted that Augustine, after calling attention to the gold and silver to be found among the pagan philosophers, concludes the passage with these words: “These, therefore, the Christian, when he separates himself in spirit from the miserable fellowship of the philosophers, ought to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use in preaching the gospel.” No hint here of the broadscoped Christian learning which Clement favored!

I am well aware, then, of disagreeing with the greatest father of the ancient church when I say that, on this issue, I side with Clement and against Augustine—and Tertullian. I do not believe that positive Christian scholarship is to be confined to understanding better what already we believe. We are allowed, and sometimes required, to seek to understand what is no part of faith, what goes beyond faith: butterflies and quarks, plate tectonics and contemporary sculpture, epistemology and leprosy.

Before I leave my defense of Clementine interpretation, let me emphasize one point which has already become clear: disagree as they did on the goal of positive Christian learning, Clement, Tertullian, and Augustine agreed on a fundamental point of strategy: whatever be the segment of reality that one is engaged in trying to understand, one consults whatever sources might be of help. And pagan philosophy may well be among those sources. Clement, Tertullian and Augustine were all agreed that there is, to use Augustine’s metaphor, gold and silver to be found in the pagan philosophers. And should one find some relevant truth in some pagan philosopher, one does not then regret that those who are not Christian are nonetheless in touch with reality. One gives thanks to God, the author of all good things.

I have been speaking in defense of the goal and strategy of Clementine interpretation, though with an important qualification. Yes, we do look for truth in the texts of non-Christians; with this, no one disagreed, though indeed it’s much more heavily emphasized by Clement than by Tertullian, or even by Augustine. Yes, we do appropriate such truth not just for the end of understanding better what already we believe but for the end of understanding the reality in which we find ourselves—God and God’s creation. And Yes, because of the faith and love which shapes our lives, the learning which emerges will have its own distinct Christian contour. This last is the qualification. It’s a Tertullianist-Augustinian point; not a point Clement makes.

But now to defend Tertullian’s favored goal. Tertullian’s strategy, so I have argued, was to interpret for the distinctive contour of Plato’s thought, so as to take note of how different that is from the contour of Christian thought. (You recognize, of course, that I am here using Plato to stand in for the totality of non-Christian thinkers.) The question before us now is this: why interpret thus? Why not glean from Plato such truth as is to be found there which is useful for one’s own incorporationist purposes, and then move on? Why care about the contours of Plato’s thought?

A bland answer comes to mind: this too is part of the reality which the Christian intellectual is allowed to study. To this an aesthetic observation might be added: it’s interesting. And a moral observation: if the Christian is going to engage in that practice of our common humanity which is scholarship, then he is thereby under obligation to honor his fellow participants by understanding

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as well as he can how they are thinking and where, to put it colloquially, they are “coming from.”

All true, I do not doubt. Especially the last point. It’s a point I make to my students once a week, thereabouts. Thou must not bear false witness against other scholars, be they ancient or contemporary. Thou must not take cheap shots. Thou must not sit in judgment until thou hast done thy best to understand. Thou must earn thy right to disagree. Thou must conduct thyself as if Plato or Augustine, Clement or Tertullian, were sitting across the table—the point being that it is much more difficult (I do not say impossible) to dishonor someone to his face.

Tertullian’s goal was different from all of these, however. The difference represented *opposition* for Tertullian. It was to bring *opposition* to light that Tertullian thought we should interpret for the distinct contours of pagan thought and take note of how those differ from the contours of Christian thought. Apples are different from oranges; but they’re not in *opposition*. Tertullian saw Platonic thought as not just different from Christian thought but in *opposition*. Human culture, whatever else it may be, is a conflict of religious visions and loyalties, a struggle over God and the good, a contest for allegiance. And Tertullian believed with all his heart that for the health and fidelity of the Christian community, that struggle has to be engaged by its scholars and intellectuals. There are a thousand and one things going on which threaten to distract and lead astray those who follow Christ. It’s the responsibility of the scholars and intellectuals of the community to dig beneath the clutter so as to spy the fundamental dynamics at work. Typically those fundamental dynamics prove to be powerful comprehensive systems of thought at work—philosophies. I would myself add that they may instead prove to be patterns of social organization which are only in part the application of the ideas of intellectuals. Be that as it may, however: It is then the responsibility of the scholars and intellectuals of the community to take the measure of those philosophies and join combat.

This, if I understand him at all, is what Tertullian was saying. And I agree. Culture is a struggle for allegiance. Christian learning must accordingly be Tertullianist learning. Tertullianist as well as Clementine—Clementine as well as Tertullianist.

§6. The question which you and I as Christian scholars and intellectuals can never be finished with pondering is how to speak and act with Christian integrity within that practice of our common humanity which is scholarship and learning. We do not, or should not, go off into our own corner to think; we participate in the practice of our common humanity. But we are not under the illusion that it is possible to participate in that practice as generic human beings; accordingly, we struggle to participate there with Christian integrity.

If nothing else, I trust my discussion has made clear that we are not the first generation to have thought about this question. Our forebears in the second century were already discussing it with a profundity both provocative and instructive. To forget or ignore their contribution would not only be to shortchange ourselves, but to dishonor them. ✠