

Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian of Carthage are contemporary Church Fathers of widely contrasting temperaments and who greatly contributed to the incorporation of Greek and Roman characteristics into Christianity. They were people of their time and place responding to both the local threat level and Clement's Greek and Tertullian's Latin background. As if to emphasise their contrast Clement gladly acknowledged his philosophical sources while Tertullian was ambivalent about the philosophical soil nurturing the development of his Christian ideas. Tertullian's theological task was greatly influenced by rhetoric<sup>1</sup> yet Clement was wary of its misuse. With less than two hundred years having elapsed since the life of Jesus for two thinkers of the same time and, for all Tertullian's adventures, apparently orthodox views to have voices that seem to come from different planets, speaks volumes for the diversity of Christian expression and has within it the seeds of schism.<sup>2</sup> Because their careers had roughly parallel time frames, albeit two thousand kilometres apart on the shores of the Mediterranean, they invite comparison of their language, theology and possible appeal to those inside and outside the Church.

An introduction to Christianity from Tertullian would be one that emphasised the features that probably attracted himself to the sect, incredible discipline to the point of accepting martyrdom.<sup>3</sup> As befitting his setting in the Church of Carthage under extreme stress<sup>4</sup>, Tertullian offers certainty and simplicity. Issues are black and white and authority rests with "God's truth handed down by the apostles."<sup>5</sup> He has no truck with philosophy and "fruitless questionings."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Dunn, "The Universal Spread of Christianity as a Rhetorical Argument in Tertullian's *adversus Iudaeos*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 (2000), 2.

<sup>2</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church* (London: SCM Press, 1982), 84.

<sup>3</sup> Lindsay Jones (ed), *Encyclopaedia of Religion* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 9085.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 118.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Kerr, *Readings in Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), 37.

<sup>6</sup> Kerr, *Readings*, 39

Oh miserable incredulity, which quite deniest to God his own purposes, simplicity and power!...We ourselves wonder, but it is because we believe. Incredulity, on the other hand, wonders, but does not believe: for simple acts it wonders at, as if they were vain; the grand results, as if they were impossible. And grant that it be just as you think sufficient to meet each point is the divine declaration which has fore-run: "The foolish things of the world hath God elected to confound its wisdom;"<sup>7</sup>

Tertullian has the strengths of a codifier and this means he can lay down the law to the enquirer and suggest that all the questions have been answered in Jesus and the tradition he bequeathed, leaving no doubt as to the source of his authoritarian zeal.<sup>8</sup> He presents the certain faith of the martyrs whose blood is the seed of the Church.<sup>9</sup>

Clement has no doubt as to the value of philosophy but contends that, "even if philosophy were useless, if the demonstration of its uselessness does good, it is then useful."<sup>10</sup> With Clement we enter the freer air of Alexandria where shades of grey are the speculative bread and butter of discourse. This leads to the odd conclusion that while it was Tertullian who left the Church and technically became a heretic, the potential for exploration and therefore heresy lay in Alexandria not Carthage.

Clement gives us his introduction to Christianity in the *Protrepticon*:

Behold the might of the new song! ... It...composed the universe into melodious order, and tuned the discord of the elements to harmonious arrangement, so that the whole world might become harmony...What, then, does this instrument--the Word of God, the Lord, the New Song--desire? To open the eyes of the blind, and unstop the ears of the deaf, and to lead the lame or the erring to righteousness, to exhibit God to the foolish, to put a stop to corruption, to conquer death, to reconcile disobedient children to their father. The instrument of God loves mankind. The Lord pities, instructs, exhorts, admonishes, saves, shields, and of His bounty promises us the kingdom of heaven as a reward for learning; and the only advantage He

---

<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism* (trans Rev. S. Thelwall), [www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-49.htm](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-49.htm) accessed 20.8.2005.

<sup>8</sup> Adalbert Hamman, *How to Read the Church Fathers* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 45.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1980), 47.

<sup>10</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* Book 1 Chapter 2 [www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book1.htm](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book1.htm) accessed 25.8.2005.

reaps is, that we are saved. For wickedness feeds on men's destruction; but truth, like the bee, harming nothing, delights only in the salvation of men.<sup>11</sup>

Clement continues the process with a catechism of sorts, the *Paedagogus* and further supplies a miscellany, the *Stomateis*, covering a wide range of life situations.<sup>12</sup> He sees the vocation of Christian teacher as one who mimics God's activity and participates in a vital way in God's plan.<sup>13</sup> Unlike Tertullian's strict rule that sees martyrdom as an ideal, Clement is a positive welcoming voice beckoning to life and emphasising free will and the goodness of the world.<sup>14</sup>

Tertullian's style has been described charitably as having a "vivid and direct literary style that explodes with epigrams, puns, satire and all kinds of devastating verbal blasts,"<sup>15</sup> but just as accurately as participating in Carthage's "narrow-minded, intolerant, venomous and... violent"<sup>16</sup> discourse. Remarkably, considering his overt rejection of philosophy, Tertullian relies on philosophy and Stoic ideas,<sup>17</sup> as well as his fearsome rhetorical skills. He is not someone that can be argued with as he has no doubts in both his self appointed role as defender of the truth and the certain triumph of Christianity. We see this to great effect as he turns the tables on his Roman audience by showing that the things Christians are accused of, while innocent, are actually practised by those in their midst.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere his approach does, however, lead him to tortuous arguments to maintain an appearance of consistency. His response to objections to the need for baptism, a stumbling block to Romans in that their greats are therefore excluded from favour, lead him to

---

<sup>11</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen* [www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-exhortation.html](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-exhortation.html) accessed 21.8.2005

<sup>12</sup> Hamman, *Church Fathers*, 35-7.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Kovacs, "Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher according to Clement of Alexandria," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, *Encyclopedia*, 1823.

<sup>15</sup> Kerr, *Readings*, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, *History*, 48.

<sup>17</sup> Eric Osborn, "Tertullian as Philosopher and Roman," in Erich Grässer (ed.), *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 233,238.

<sup>18</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* (trans Rev S. Thelwall) Chapter 9. [www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian01.html](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian01.html) accessed 27/8/2005.

imply the both efficacy of John's baptism of the disciples and the heretical nature of any Jewish baptism. He further decides not to even explain how exceptions are made such that Abraham pleased God without baptism, merely stating that baptism is now law.<sup>19</sup> Further, his desire to accept the Old Testament in toto pushes him to excuse some of the more grisly episodes in that history as justifiable and tie himself to a rigid expectation of blessing in return for obedience.<sup>20</sup>

Clement is more sanguine about letting himself get tied down to absolute specifics. He uses literary tools appropriate to good Greek style, yet is happy to mix in terms from the tradition of mystery religions to add to the depth of his metaphorical repertoire<sup>21</sup>. He deplores rhetoric merely to win arguments:

But the art of sophistry, which the Greeks cultivated, is a fantastic power, which makes false opinions like true by means of words. For it produces rhetoric in order to persuasion, and disputation for wrangling. These arts, therefore, if not joined with philosophy, will be injurious to every one.<sup>22</sup>

He never did write his planned *Didaskalos* and Chadwick puts this down to the risky nature of being totally clear.<sup>23</sup> The *Stromateis* as a replacement is a good example of Clement at his most deliberately unsystematic.<sup>24</sup> Clement is simply not going to spell things out. Just as a life lived in faith — the daily obedience to the will of God<sup>25</sup> — is the requirement for true gnosis, the reader will find no easy summary to Clement's work but must both take it all in and live it to understand, making his writing the opposite of Tertullian's direct impaling prose. This acknowledgment of incompleteness and mystery in religious language is found in

---

<sup>19</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism*.

<sup>20</sup> Eric Osborne, "The Subtlety of Tertullian," *Vigiliae Christianae* 52 (1998), 363-4.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Osborne, "Clement of Alexandria: A Review of Research, 1958-1982," *The Second Century* 3 (1983), 223.

<sup>22</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* Book 1 Chapter 8  
[www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book1.htm](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book1.htm) accessed 25.8.2005.

<sup>23</sup> Chadwick, *Church in Ancient Society*, 125.

<sup>24</sup> Eric Osborn, *The Philosophy of Clement of Alexandria* (London: Cambridge at the University Press, 1957), 7.

<sup>25</sup> Frend, *The Early Church*, 83.

his acceptance of the symbolic, metaphoric and allegorical in scripture.<sup>26</sup> It also empowers Clement to plough the middle road of moderation between the licentiousness prevalent in some quarters and extreme life-denying asceticism, whereas Tertullian's lack of flexibility leaves a much harder edge to his rejection of the pleasures of this world.

At first glance Tertullian would seem to have little to offer the Roman world. He exemplifies the concerns of Celsus that these barbarians presume to keep God for themselves<sup>27</sup> and his aphorisms decrying reason reinforce Lucian's barbs about gullible Christians.<sup>28</sup> Still, Tertullian reserves his barbs for the idolatry of the Empire and the behaviour of their magistrates rather than Rome as a whole, and finds praise for Roman virtue.<sup>29</sup> This is unsurprising considering his family background and it is possible that given the purposelessness endemic in Roman life<sup>30</sup> that the certainties and rigor that Tertullian's approach exemplifies would have seemed a beacon to those Romans suffering from a lack of direction.

While a pagan audience would have understood the Stoic background implicit in Tertullian, Clement's Neoplatonism places him right in the centre of Greek philosophical thought and they would have shared a common thought world for exploration.

Clement's thought is a great example of a synthesis of Christian thinking and Greek Philosophy. Christianity had to cope with Neo-Platonism as a universal and extremely impressive system. All the values of the past were united in it. Christianity had to use it and conquer it at the same time.<sup>31</sup>

Because Clement is not requiring his Greek audience to erase their mental parameters, he asks less of his pagan seeker than Tertullian's about face. Just to

---

<sup>26</sup> Chadwick, *Church in Ancient Society*, 128.

<sup>27</sup> Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (London: Mandarin, 1994), 116.

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, *History*, 48.

<sup>29</sup> Osborn, *Tertullian as Philosopher*, 241-243.

<sup>30</sup> Frend, *The Early Church*, 80.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 56.

make sure that they will be comfortable, he inserts allusions to and quotations from Homer, Euripides, Plato and Aristotle as well as Greek poets and Hellenised Jewish wisdom literature.<sup>32</sup> This is also a reasonable retort to the ignorant Christians taunt, Clement having the confidence not only to quote the masters, but also to set up “an implied dialogue that makes it clear that he questions the model and uses it critically.”<sup>33</sup> The Jewish heritage so important to Clement<sup>34</sup> is retrospectively rehabilitated in Greek eyes by his embrace of the “theft of the Greeks” theory from its Jewish origins<sup>35</sup> such that Aristotle is claimed to be dependant on the Torah. Clement’s exposition of the end of man as refinement by fire rather than damnation<sup>36</sup> makes him a less fearsome potential catechist than Tertullian.

For fellow Christians, Tertullian and Clement are of their own region and their own culture. What Osborn says of Tertullian and Origen applies as well to Origen’s predecessor:

In Tertullian *credere* and *intelligere*, in Origen *pistis* and *gnosis*, ran their parallel different courses, which would later be joined by Augustine. Instead of talking about ‘latinising’ and ‘hellenising’ the gospel, we do better to look at what the gospel did to a latin Tertullian and an hellenic Origen.<sup>37</sup>

While they both leaned towards asceticism, Tertullian so much so that he toppled into Montanism, both shared a distaste for images<sup>38</sup>, both fought what they regarded as heresy and looked on Jesus as the Logos; the main thing they share is their respective positions at the forefront of transforming Christianity into an intellectually respectable cult that could take its place amongst the philosophical schools of the Roman world.

---

<sup>32</sup> Chadwick, *Church in Ancient Society*, 126.

<sup>33</sup> Annewies Van Den Hoek, “Techniques of Quotation in Clement of Alexandria,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 50 (1996), 236.

<sup>34</sup> James Paget, “Clement of Alexandria and the Jews,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998), 92.

<sup>35</sup> Winrich Lohr, “The Theft of the Greeks” *Revue D’histoire Ecclésiastique* 95 (2000), 403.

<sup>36</sup> Frend, *The Early Church*, 84.

<sup>37</sup> Osborn, *Tertullian as Philosopher*, 233.

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, *History*, 105.

Galen, who came across Roman Christians in the mid second century, certainly saw them as such, rather than just a cult to be pilloried, when he acknowledged the success of their faith in producing the fruits normally associated with philosophy.<sup>39</sup> Admittedly, he suggests that it is pointless engaging them in serious discussion as they hold views that cannot be swayed by evidence.<sup>40</sup> He would have likely found Tertullian little to his liking:

Galen, however, found Christian (and Jewish) teaching objectionable. He considered Christians dogmatic and uncritical. They were unwilling to submit their beliefs to philosophical examination. They asked people to accept their doctrines solely on faith. That was, if not a fatal flaw to Galen, certainly a serious shortcoming.<sup>41</sup>

Celsus, too, found this aspect of Christianity that appeared to privilege ignorance ludicrous:

Some [Christians]...do not even want to give or to receive a reason for what they believe, and use such expressions as 'Do not ask questions; just believe' and 'Your faith will save you.' Others quote the apostle Paul. 'The wisdom in the world is evil and foolishness a good thing.'<sup>42</sup>

Porphyry, writing after Tertullian and Clement, hones in on the exclusive nature of Jesus' salvation, to the exclusion of "the innumerable souls, who can in no way be faulted,"<sup>43</sup> an objection Tertullian thinks he answers when addressing baptism.

To become a Christian required acceptance that a peripheral, provincial and barbarous group had the answer that Rome and Greece did not. To be a Christian in Carthage was to be a noisy separatist and perhaps have to decide whether to be conspicuous enough to die. As much as Tertullian is a product of his Latin roots,

---

<sup>39</sup> Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 80.

<sup>40</sup> Wilken, *Christians*, 72.

<sup>41</sup> Wilken, *Christians*, 92.

<sup>42</sup> Celsus, quoted in Wilken, *Christians*, 97.

<sup>43</sup> Porphyry, quoted in Wilken, *Christians*, 162.

he does not make it easy for Romans to be swayed, and the yet his undoubted success speaks volumes for the force of his character.

In Alexandria, things are less pressured and both Clement and Origen found the need to be hidden or make themselves scarce during persecutions rather than seek the martyr's crown.<sup>44</sup> Alexandrian Christianity also was likely to be more acceptable to the outsiders who found the reliance on faith alone disturbing in that the Church in Alexandria "did not think naïve orthodoxy possible."<sup>45</sup> Clement for his part "by his learning, his practical common sense and his tolerance, made it pleasant for the educated and well-to-do Alexandrian to become Christian."<sup>46</sup> Tertullian had no interest in such tolerance.

Tertullian's courageous championing of the Christian cause against those who would slander and attempt to destroy them has a certain attraction in a struggling, oppressed community. It also leads him to rhetorical crimes as he stretches credulity to maintain consistent to his black and white world, where even martyrdom makes sense. His directness was rewarded by posterity with his contribution to the Church's understanding of such crucial concepts as the Trinity<sup>47</sup> but the legacy of his triumphalist approach looked less attractive once Christianity became Christendom instead of welcoming the Parousia. Clement of Alexandria is intellectually more courageous, because with him Christianity is let loose amongst its competing philosophies and is presented as their culmination rather than their opposition. In this milieu, Clement remains a Christian and a moralist but with an

---

<sup>44</sup> Frend, *The Early Church*, 85.

<sup>45</sup> Chadwick, *Church in Ancient Society*, 124.

<sup>46</sup> A. R. Harnack, "They Speak to Us across the centuries 1. Clement of Alexandria," *Expository Times* 108 (1997), 292.

<sup>47</sup> Eric Osborne, "They Speak to Us across the centuries 8. Tertullian," *Expository Times* 109 (1998), 358.

appreciation of mystery and a respect for the Greek culture that makes his thought more accommodating to future uncertainty.

## Bibliography

Armstrong, K. *A History of God*. London: Mandarin, 1994.

Chadwick, H. *The Church in Ancient Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*

[www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-exhortation.html](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-exhortation.html) accessed 21.8.2005

Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*.

[www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book1.htm](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book1.htm) accessed 25.8.2005.

Dunn, G. "The Universal Spread of Christianity as a Rhetorical Argument in Tertullian's *adversus Iudaeos*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 (2000), 1-19.

Freund, W. *The Early Church*. (rev. ed.) London: SCM, 1982.

Grässer, E. (ed.), *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997.

Hamman, A. *How to Read the Church Fathers* New York: Crossroad, 1993.

Harcus, A. "They Speak to Us across the Centuries 1. Clement of Alexandria," *The Expository Times* 108 (1997), 292-295.

Johnson, P. *A History of Christianity*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1980.

Jones L. (ed.) *Encyclopaedia of Religion*. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005.

Kerr, H. (ed.) *Readings in Christian Thought*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966.

Kovacs, J. "Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher according to Clement of Alexandria," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001), 3-25.

Lohr, W. "The Theft of the Greeks," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 95 (2000), 403-426.

Osborn, E. "Clement of Alexandria: A Review of Research, 1958-1982," *The Second Century* 3 (1983), 219-244.

- Osborn, E. *The Philosophy of Clement of Alexandria*. London: Cambridge at the University Press, 1957.
- Osborn, E. "The Subtlety of Tertullian," *Vigiliae Christianae* 52 (1998), 361-370.
- Osborn, E. "They Speak to Us across the Centuries 8. Tertullian," *The Expository Times* 109 (1998), 357-360.
- Paget, J. "Clement of Alexandria and the Jews," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998), 86-97.
- Tertullian, *Apology* (trans Rev S. Thelwall),  
[www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian01.html](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian01.html) accessed 27.8.2005.
- Tertullian, *On Baptism* (trans Rev. S. Thelwall), [www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-49.htm](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-49.htm) accessed 20.8.2005.
- Tillich, P. *A History of Christian Thought*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968.
- Van Den Hoek, A. "Techniques of Quotation in Clement of Alexandria," *Vigiliae Christianae* 50 (1996), 223-243.
- Wilken, R. *The Christians as the Roman Saw Them*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.