

# Tertullian and Rhetoric: Subverting Classical Culture

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Introduction.....	1
De Praescriptione haereticorum.....	4
Classical Rhetorical Structure.....	8
De anima.....	9
<i>Exordium</i> .....	9
<i>Narratio</i> and <i>Propositio</i> .....	9
<i>Confirmatio</i> : Origin, Nature and Faculties of the Soul.....	9
<i>Refutatio</i> .....	9
<i>Peroratio</i> .....	9
Conclusion and Ideas For Further Research.....	9
Select Bibliography.....	10

## Introduction

Tertullian is one of the most quotable, and most misquoted, Church Fathers. As a polemicist, Tertullian uses his gift to flatten an opponent with a phrase, and then kick the helpless, defeated heretic with the swift boot of sarcasm. His gift for the mordant phrase means that his one-liners linger in the memory long after the context or controversy that he addressed has been forgotten.

Over the past 1700 years there has been much controversy over two remarks of his: “credo quia ineptum” and “Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis? quid academiae et ecclesiae?”<sup>1</sup> This paper was inspired by the second remark, and a comment made by T.D. Barnes concerning it in his controversial, and in some ways brilliant, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*.<sup>2</sup>

Barnes uses the Jerusalem/Athens “dichotomy” to frame the debate around Tertullian’s rejection or embrace of classical culture. He contends that “in a wider sense he has himself reconciled Christianity and classical culture”.<sup>3</sup> Barnes’ summary of his argument to support this claim deserves quotation in full:

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<sup>1</sup> The first remark is usually misquoted as “credo quia absurdum”, which misrepresents Tertullian’s attitude towards rational religious belief. The reference is to *De carne Christi* 5:4, and the context is “crucifixus est dei filius: non pudet, quia pudendum est. et mortuus est dei filius: prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est. et sepultus resurrexit: certum est, quia impossibile.” The second remark can be translated “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem, or the Academy to do with the Church?”. and is from *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 7.9. For an interesting discussion of Tertullian, rationality and belief, see Justo Gonzalez, “Athens and Jerusalem Revisited: Reason and Authority in Tertullian”, from *Studies in Early Christianity* VIII (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), p.152ff.

Throughout this paper, Tertullian will be quoted from the Latin text in the *Corpus Christianorum Latinorum*, vols 1-2 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1954). This text will be abbreviated as *CCL* hereafter. The author will translate the quotes where the meaning is not immediately obvious. The translations will appear in either in the main text or footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> Barnes, Timothy D., *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), especially Chapter XIII, p. 205-210. This work will be abbreviated as *Barnes* hereafter.

<sup>3</sup> Barnes, p. 210.

“For he used the benefits of his pagan erudition to defend and propagate what he considered to be the truth. The closing words of the *De Pallio*<sup>4</sup> resolve any conflict between the two cultures: the humble pallium of the pagan philosopher is ennobled, once it is donned by a Christian. In Tertullian’s hands, rhetoric too underwent a similar transformation.”<sup>5</sup>

This paper will use Barnes’ analysis as a jumping-off point to look at Tertullian’s use of, and reaction to, classical culture. The quotation above raises two questions. First, why did Tertullian use pagan erudition? Second, from whom was he defending his faith? These questions will be investigated by considering two important works: *De Praescriptione Hereticorum* and *De anima*. Based on an analysis of these works, the paper will consider a third important question: whether Tertullian, as Barnes states, “had himself reconciled Christianity and classical culture”<sup>6</sup>.

This paper will demonstrate that Tertullian uses “pagan erudition”, in the form of classical persuasive rhetoric, to persuade an audience that can be reached through it. The answers to the three questions above form the thesis of the paper. First, Tertullian does not need persuasive rhetoric in a situation where he simply trying to strengthen and enlighten the faithful. Second, when Tertullian fights a battle, his opponents are both heretics and pagans. While he appears to attack both them in the same work, he normally uses the attack on paganism to undermine his Gnostic opponents. *De anima* is a striking example of this technique.

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<sup>4</sup> CCL, *De pallio*, 6.4.21: “Gaude, pallium, et exsulta! melior te iam philosophia dignata est, ex quo Christianum vestire coepisti”. The Corpus Christianorum Scriptorum edition of this treatise will be abbreviated *De pallio* hereafter.

<sup>5</sup> Barnes, p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

Third, Tertullian uses Classical rhetoric to subvert the typical religious syncretism<sup>7</sup>, in vogue since Alexander, in favor of the exclusionary claims of Christianity. This syncretism allowed multiple gods from multiple locations to be worshipped. It emphasized acceptance and toleration, rather than exclusive worship of a single god. To reconcile “Christianity and classical culture” would require a transformation of this syncretism.

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<sup>7</sup> “Syncretism” is defined, for the purposes of this paper, as “the attempted reconciliation or union of different or opposing principles, practices or parties, as in philosophy or religion”. (*The American College Dictionary*)

## ***De Praescriptione haereticorum***

Tertullian's success as a polemicist is demonstrated by his impact on later theologians. His impact can be seen in the fact that the weapons he chose and developed been used ever since.<sup>8</sup> A key element of his persuasiveness comes from his ability to understand his audience. This paper will first examine the tools Tertullian employs in *De Praescriptione haereticorum*.<sup>9</sup>

Tertullian lays out a general case against heretics in *De Praescriptione haereticorum*. This didactic work seems to be intended to strengthen a Christian<sup>10</sup> audience against heresy. It accepts the inevitability of heresy and points out that the existence of heresies was foretold in Scripture: "Conditio praesentium temporum etiam hanc admonitionem prouocat nostram non oportere nos mirari super haereses istas, siue quia sunt, futurae enim praenuntiabantur".<sup>11</sup> The parent of heresy is philosophy: "Ipsae denique haereses a philosophia subornantur."<sup>12</sup> This is a constant theme in Tertullian, as will be seen in *Apologeticum* and in the treatise that he devotes to the destruction of Platonic ideas concerning the soul, *De anima*.

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<sup>8</sup> Tertullian's originality is a separate question. He was clearly indebted to, for example, Irenaeus, for a number of his ideas, including probably the concept of *regula fidei*. Influences on Tertullian are discussed at length in J.H. Waszink, *De Anima Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani* (Amsterdam: J.M. Meulenhoff, 1947). This topic deserves a separate study.

<sup>9</sup> Since this paper is intended to be a rhetorical and literary study, the chronology of Tertullian's works is not discussed. Since Dr. Barnes wrote his book this chronology has been hotly debated by scholars far better qualified than this author. For purposes of this paper, the conventional chronology given in *CCL*, volume II, p. 1627f is assumed, as opposed to that in *Barnes*.

<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the term "Christian" will be used to designate both Catholic and Montanist believers. It is assumed that Tertullian's conception of Montanism did not require acceptance of doctrine counter to Catholic orthodoxy.

<sup>11</sup> *CCL, De Praescriptione haereticorum*, 1:1. "The condition of the present times in fact calls out our warning, that we ought not to be surprised on account of these heresies, nor that they exist, since in fact they were predicted to occur." The Corpus Christianorum Scriptorum edition of this treatise will be abbreviated *De Praes. haer.* in footnotes hereafter.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:3: "These heresies are, in fact, instigated by philosophy."

The cause of heresy is the weakness and gullibility of the Christian,<sup>13</sup> as well as excessive seeking into questions that have already been settled by the Church's scriptures.<sup>14</sup> True doctrine can be defined by the Rule of Faith, the "*regula fidei*". This rule is summarized by Tertullian as:

Si haec ita sunt, constat perinde omnem doctrinam, quae cum illis ecclesiis apostolicis matricibus et originalibus fidei conspirat, ueritati deputandam, id sine dubio tenentem, quod ecclesiae ab apostolis, apostoli a christo, christus a deo accepit; omnem uero doctrinam de mendacio praeiudicandam quae sapiat contra ueritatem ecclesiarum et apostolorum christi et dei.<sup>15</sup>

The *regula fidei* ensures correct understanding of Scripture. Most important, the Rule bounds inquiry into all matters of faith, providing a fence, as it were, for the sheep, and separating the sheep from the heretical goats<sup>16</sup>. Tertullian also makes a case that the heretics are not entitled to use the Scriptures, because these Scriptures belong to the Church as part of the testimony of faith that the Church inherited and which is ruled by the *regula fidei*. The heretics have been disinherited and have no claim to the legacy of the Apostles.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 3:1: "Solent quidem isti miriones etiam de quibusdam personis ab haeresi captis aedificari in ruinam".

<sup>14</sup> Chapter 11 of *De Praes. haer.*

<sup>15</sup> *CCL, De Praes. haer.* 21:3 "If this is the case, it is established, then, that all doctrine which agrees with these apostolic, mother churches, originals of the faith, must be accepted for truth, holding without doubt that which the churches received from the Apostles, the Apostles from Christ, and Christ from God. Indeed, all doctrine must be prejudged [to come from] falsehood that one understands [to be] against the truth of the churches, of the Apostles of Christ, and of God."

<sup>16</sup> See Francine Jo Cardman, *Tertullian on the Resurrection* (Dissertation, Yale, 1974), p. 3f: "In contrast to Origen, for instance, who uses the Rule of Faith as a touchstone from which to launch his theological speculations, Tertullian regards the Rule as the boundary of inquiry, and he is forever working inward from it, explicating and defending the Rule, but never venturing beyond it into the realm of speculation or systematic construction".

<sup>17</sup> *CCL, De Praes. haer.* 37:6: "Vos certe exheredauerunt semper et abdicauerunt ut extraneos, ut inimicos" ("They [the Apostles] have always disinherited you and rejected [you] as strangers, as enemies").

*De Praescriptione haereticorum* uses Scripture to explain why heresies can exist, and why some heretics style themselves as Christian, despite the fact that Truth has been revealed in the Church. This aspect of Tertullian's argument seems to be intended to strengthen the faithful of the Church because he has already taken Scripture away from the heretics.

The effectiveness of Tertullian's arguments in *De Praescriptione haereticorum* derives from his understanding of his audience. Tertullian uses ideas that will resonate with a believing audience to strengthen their resistance to heresy. While he touches on a favorite theme, that philosophy is the parent of heresy, he does not need to attack the philosophical underpinnings of the constellation of Gnostic heresies in order to persuade this audience. His objectives can be met through use of Scripture and through explication of the method that underpins the *regula fidei*.

It is interesting that *De Praescriptione haereticorum* does not seem to be amenable to the kind of rhetorical analysis used by a number of scholars<sup>18</sup> on his other works. In *De Praescriptione haereticorum* Tertullian simply launches his argument about the origins, effects, causes and cures for heresy with the first chapter<sup>19</sup>. He then enunciates and explicates his key points: heresy has been warned against in Scripture<sup>20</sup>; heresy is product of self-will<sup>21</sup> and pagan philosophy<sup>22</sup>; curiosity should not range beyond the *regula fidei*<sup>23</sup>. Opposing views of heretics are rebutted as necessary, but there is no detailed attack made on them.

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<sup>18</sup> For example, Drs. Barnes and Cardman.

<sup>19</sup> That is, Chapter 1 discusses the inevitability of heresy; Chapter 2, that the weak will be victims of heresy; Chapter 3 that heresy was warned against in the New Testament.

<sup>20</sup> *De Praes. haer.* Chapters 1 and 4.

<sup>21</sup> *De Praes. haer.* 6.

<sup>22</sup> *De Praes. haer.* 7

<sup>23</sup> *De Praes. haer.* Chapters 11 and 14.

Finally, Tertullian makes no attempt to draw the reader into his presentation by establishing common ground (*ethos*). The premise that heresy is an evil is simply assumed. It may well be that Tertullian felt no need for the *dispositio* or *τάξις* because the work addressed an audience whose prejudices and presuppositions he shared. There was no need, in this treatise, to mount a full-scale assault on heresy. Tertullian's purpose is to help the faithful avoid heresy.

## Classical Rhetorical Structure

When Tertullian needs to attack the foundations of a belief-system he will deploy all the resources of classical rhetoric. For works intended for persuasion, as opposed to didactic works, Tertullian tends use the typical classical rhetorical structure illustrated in the table<sup>24</sup> below:

<i>exordium</i>	Introduction
<i>narratio</i>	Statement of Facts
<i>propositio</i>	Point at issue or statement of point speaker wishes to make
<i>partitio</i>	Outline of the major points in the argument.
<i>confirmatio</i>	Proof
<i>confutatio</i>	Counter argument(s) considered. In Tertullian, chapters devoted to <i>confutatio</i> are often interspersed among chapters of <i>confirmatio</i> .
<i>peroratio</i>	Summary and conclusion

This method is useful for pagan, heretical and Christian audiences, since it earns the reader's sympathy instead of assuming it as a prerequisite. For an educated audience the structure would have been instantly recognizable, and would probably have, itself, contributed to the persuasiveness of the treatise. That *De anima* follows this structure can be seen in the next section.

<sup>24</sup> This table is based on the discussion in *Barnes*, 206-209; Cicero, *De oratore* 1, §137-147 from the Loeb edition of *De oratore Books 1,2*, E.W. Sutton, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942); Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Book 4, from the Loeb edition *Institutio Oratoria*, H.M. Hubbell, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); Anderson, R. Dean, *Glossary of Greek Rhetorical Terms Connected to Methods of Argumentation* (Leuven, NL: Peeters, 2000).

**Outline of Paper's Contents:**

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