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**Wilhite, David E.**

***Tertullian the African: An Anthropological Reading of Tertullian's Context and Identities***

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This rich study, strongly characterized from the methodological point of view, is the revised version of the author's doctoral dissertation at St. Mary's College/School of Divinity of the University of St. Andrews.

Chapter 1 (1–36) provides a methodological introduction, especially in regard to the disciplinary frameworks in which the whole investigation is conducted—that is, postcolonialism and social anthropology—and the few realia of Tertullian's life that it is possible to trace. Methodological discussion is certainly needed in a work of this kind, for, as Wilhite warns, a postcolonial approach to history, which has been recently embraced in many studies on the Roman Empire, entails reading data through a different set of hermeneutical questions. Indeed, in his work Wilhite offers a postcolonial rereading of ancient North Africa, with a view to establishing how Tertullian may have perceived himself, as an African under Roman domination or as a Roman. In order to serve this purpose, he also engages in an anthropological reading of Tertullian; indeed, anthropology and history (and archaeology) have long enjoyed fruitful interdisciplinary relationships. One recent example that I would like to mention is the archaeological and historical research conducted by Ramsay MacMullen on *The Second Church* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), illustrating the life and cult of Christian masses from A.D. 200 to 400; moreover, a large section therein is devoted to North Africa precisely in

the time of Tertullian (51–68). Throughout his study, Wilhite shows a good acquaintance with the issues and methods of these approaches, postcolonial and social-anthropological, and the relevant scholarship.

All that we know about Tertullian, from his writings themselves, is painstakingly discussed, also in the light of recent scholarship. Several points have been questioned, especially by Timothy Barnes. Even though Tertullian's full name, place of birth, father's profession, conversion, ordained status, and schismatic adhesion to Montanism are debated, scholars agree that he was from Africa Proconsularis and that he received a high standard of education; his rhetorical skills and culture are not to be questioned, even though it is uncertain whether he was a jurist and should be identified with the homonymous Roman jurist. A propos the question whether he was a rhetorician or a jurist, however, it might be observed that these fields tended to be very close to one another. A branch of rhetoric was precisely the *eloquentia judicialis* or the *δικανικόν* rhetorical genre. In this connection, I also refer readers to F. Chapot, *Virtus veritatis: Langage et vérité dans l'œuvre de Tertullien* (Turnhout: Brepols-Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2009), a study that of course the author could not have known.

Tertullian's relationship to philosophy is also taken into consideration, especially Eric Osborn's thesis that, in spite of his famous statement that Athens has nothing to do with Jerusalem, Tertullian should be regarded as a philosopher, and in particular as influenced by Stoic philosophy. I think that much in Tertullian's writings indeed supports this view. I also see that this position is basically espoused, with noteworthy arguments, by Claudio Moreschini, *Storia della filosofia patristica* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2004), 181–216. Barnes's argument, on the other hand, seems particularly forceful on the score of Tertullian's laical status. Although Jerome claims that he was a presbyter, at least two places in his works seem to attest that in fact he was a layman (*De mon.* 12.1–4; above all *Exhort. cast.* 7.3: *nonne et laici sacerdotes sumus?*).

As for Tertullian's adhesion to Montanism, it is hardly possible to deny it, as his own writings testify to it, but it is rightly questioned whether this implies that he perceived himself as a schismatic and really wanted to part ways with the church. Wilhite returns to this problem on 167–76, where he refers to Rankin's and Tabbernee's contention that Tertullian always includes the "Catholics" within his understanding of the church and that the term *psychici* that he uses should not simply be equated with "Catholics"; rather, it designates those Catholics who did not adhere to his strict ethical principles. In this light, Wilhite analyzes those works of Tertullian that are usually considered to be influenced by Montanism, especially *De monogamia*, *De ieiunio*, and *De pudicitia*. Here he openly refers to Montanus, Maximilla, and Priscilla and defends them as not preaching another God than Christians did, denying Christ's divinity, or overturning Christian rules

of faith and hope, but simply recommending more frequent fasting than marrying (*De ieiunio* 1.3). What Tertullian himself narrates in *Adversus Praxean* 1.5 is quite interesting: the bishop of Rome himself (*episcopus Romanus*, probably identifiable with Pope Victor) was about to acknowledge the prophetic gifts of Montanus, Prisca (*sic*), and Maximilla and to bestow his peace on the churches of Asia and Phrygia, when Praxeas spread false charges against them, thus forcing the pope to recall the pacifying letter that he had already issued or that he was going to issue by then (*iam emissas*).

What is clearer, as Wilhite rightly remarks, is that Tertullian displays an anti-Roman attitude. It is crucial to establish in which sense this opposition should be interpreted. Thus, to clarify this point, Wilhite begins a broader survey concerning the Roman conquest of Africa Proconsularis and the less successful Romanization of Africa; the latter proceeded along with an “Africanization” of Rome that culminated with the ascent of Septimius Severus to the imperial throne. The issue of the Christianization of Roman Africa in the time of Tertullian is tackled to a greater extent. One of the witnesses examined is, of course, the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*; Wilhite shares the view of most modern scholars that this is a reliable document. I agree (see my “Il dossier di Perpetua: Una rilettura storica e letteraria,” *RIL* 139 [2005]: 309–52), even though Judith Perkins may well be right that the emphasis on maternity in the representations of Perpetua and Felicitas raises suspicions regarding their historical veracity and that the more questionable seems to be the depiction of Felicitas. For the Perpetua section does not refer to her at all, and Felicitas’s character, which is the less developed of the two, seems to rather be a double of Perpetua’s (*Roman Imperial Identities in the Christian Era* [London: Routledge, 2009], 159–71, a work that Wilhite obviously could not know while writing his book).

Chapter 2 (37–75) focuses on social identities against the backdrop of anthropological theories of identity, which address the ways in which notions such as those of “personhood,” “citizenship,” or “nationality” were ideologically and socially constructed. Three categories of social identity in Roman Africa are individuated—Roman colonizers, indigenous Africans, and the new elite—and the problem is addressed of how Christians were seen by non-Christians in Africa Proconsularis. Comparative hints are drawn from Lucian, Pliny, and Aelius Aristides, and more direct indications are taken from the pagan crowd’s hostility in the *Passio Perpetuae*. Wilhite is right to think that Apuleius of Madauros included several anti-Christian points in his works (see my *I romanzi antichi e il Cristianesimo: Contesto e contatti* [Madrid: Signifer, 2001], ch. 9; idem, “Apuleius and Christianity: The Philosopher-Novelist in Front of a New Religion,” International Conference on the Ancient Novel, Lisbon University, 21–26 July 2008, forthcoming).

To explore how Christians in turn responded to non-Christians, Wilhite mainly analyzes the *Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum* and the *Passio Perpetuae*, in which animosity against those associated with Caesar and Rome is perceivable. Tertullian's own self-identity is worked out from an analysis of his *Ad nationes* and *Apologeticum*. In both cases the declared audience is outside Tertullian's community and composed by non-Christians. I entirely agree that the *Romani imperii antistites* to whom Tertullian addresses his *Apologeticum* "are not only Roman officials in general, including provincial officials, but an audience located specifically in Rome" (69). Indeed, he invites them to consult the historical acts there (*commentarios vestros*, 5.3) that attested the *senatusconsultum* of A.D. 35 against the Christians, whose historicity is generally denied by scholars but is confirmed by a Porphyrian fragment, as I and Marta Sordi argued in "Il senatoconsulto del 35 contro i Cristiani in un frammento porfiriano," *Aevum* 78 (2004): 59–67. The Senate was in Rome, and that debate arose after a proposal of Emperor Tiberius to the Senate; it is therefore clear that Tertullian is principally thinking of Rome. This is further corroborated by Tertullian's appeal to the people of Rome in 35.6: *Ipsos Quirites, ipsam vernaculam septem collium plebem convenio*. In *Ad nationes*, on the contrary, it is specifically African pagans that Tertullian is addressing, as is clear from his pun in 1.17.4. Wilhite's conclusion is that Tertullian ascribed himself multiple identities, including Christian, non-Roman, and African.

Chapter 3 (76–102) is devoted to kinship identity, investigated through the disciplinary lenses of social anthropology. Many anthropologists agree that kinship is a social construct more than a biological datum, but they generally do not reject the analytical category of kinship altogether. They rather relate it to gender, ethnic, and class identity. It is true that the *pater familias* was considered to hold absolute authority over his household, "including even the right to take their life" (83), although in the time of Tertullian this right was restricted, practically extending only to slaves and to the decision of keeping or exposing a child born in his household. On Christian opposition to this exposure right, see my "Il matrimonio cristiano in Clemente: Un confronto con la legislazione romana e gli Stoici romani," in *Il matrimonio dei Cristiani: Egesi biblica e diritto romano. XXXVII Incontro di studiosi dell'Antichità cristiana, Roma, Augustinianum, 6–8 Maggio 2008* (Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum 114; Rome: Augustinianum 2009), 351–72. Kinship relations in *Passio Perpetuae* are the object of special attention by Wilhite, who remarks, with several scholars, on the absence of any mention of Perpetua's husband, even though her little baby is mentioned many times. This is probably because her husband was a pagan. Wilhite also focuses on *Ad uxorem* 1 and 2, where Tertullian defends the idea of the *univira matrona* (more sternly in the former than in the latter treatise, however) and insists that *nulla restitutio nuptiarum in diem resurrectionis repromittitur*.

Chapter 4 (103–19) focuses on class theory in the framework of social anthropology; the written records from historians and other authors from the ancient world is generally unconcerned with lower classes. Wilhite pays particular attention to the new elite in Roman Africa in Tertullian's time; he is right that Christians, even as early as in that period, did not belong only to lower classes. Tertullian himself very probably belonged to upper-class Christians, and *Apologeticum* 37.4 claimed that even noble classes consisted of Christians in his day. In his analysis of *De cultu feminarum* 1 and 2, Wilhite argues that these two works were originally two different works, especially because of the different attitude regarding wealth and the different addressees in each of them.

Ethnic identity is discussed in chapter 5 (120–45), against the backdrop of social anthropology as well. Wilhite observes that the very notion of race is now discredited in many disciplines, especially in social anthropology. For the ancient world, an important recent study not mentioned is *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, by Benjamin Isaac (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), with special attention to Roman imperialism on 304–499. Irad Malkin's position is mentioned, who even asks whether it is legitimate to apply the term "ethnicity," invented in the mid-twentieth century, to an ancient phenomenon. Roman perceptions of African people, their skin color, their language, and pronunciation of Latin are examined; one example is Apuleius, who defined himself as *Seminumidam et Semigaetulum* and whose *sermo patrius* was probably Punic. In the day of Tertullian, Septimius Severus "sounded like an African somehow right up to his old age." Wilhite reasonably deems it unlikely that African Christians understood themselves in terms of a new ethnic identity (131) and analyzes Tertullian's *De pallio*. Tertullian's setting aside the *toga* in favor of wearing a *pallium* is understood as the choice, not of Greek attire, but of a traditional African dress, or better of philosophical and priestly garb. Indeed, it is regarded as a Christian dress, the garment of the *melior philosophia* (6.2). I would like to remark that Tertullian, notwithstanding his antiphilosophical pose and rhetoric, in fact did not refrain from describing Christianity as "philosophy," *melior philosophia*, just as Justin did by calling it φιλοσοφία θεία—and it is meaningful that Justin's attitude to philosophy was not at all negative. He was convinced that germs of the Logos, that is, Christ, were already present in Greek philosophy, which was rich in truth and valuable.

Chapter 6 (146–76) revolves around anthropology of religion and how religious identity was defined in the time of Tertullian, both on the Christian and on the pagan sides. A very interesting discussion is provided here concerning the legal basis for anti-Christian persecution in North Africa and in the Roman Empire in the first two centuries. Wilhite is right to reject the old view that Nero enacted specific legislation against the Christians and to hypothesize rather that Christians could be convicted on the basis of laws pertaining to *collegia* or *superstitio* (157). Indeed, it is probable that the latter is the case:

after the above-mentioned *senatusconsultum* under Tiberius, when the Senate refused to recognize Christianity as a *religio licita*, Christians were liable to death as members of a *superstitio illicita*. Condemnations, however, did not occur until late in Nero's reign, because Tiberius, thanks to his *tribunicia potestas*, vetoed every accusation against the Christians. This is again recounted exactly by Tertullian. Later, Nero limited himself to revoking Tiberius's veto on anti-Christian accusations. Additionally, it is possible that the so-called Nazareth Edict was emanated by him, but it is unlikely that it covered the whole of the empire (see my *I romanzi antichi e il Cristianesimo: Contesto e contatti* [Madrid: Signifer, 2001], chs. 1 and 8), whereas the *senatusconsultum*, the veto, and its revocation were valid empire-wide. Just from North Africa, and more specifically from Egypt (probably Alexandria), a papyrus letter stems that very probably is one of the earliest Christian letters known and reflects the difficult situation of early Christian communities due to the very fact that Christianity was a *superstitio illicita* and therefore Christians were liable to death; this is why they had to attract the less hostility possible, since denunciations came from hostile people and led Christians to death unless they denied their faith (see my "Una delle più antiche lettere cristiane extra-canoniche?" *Aegyptus* 80 [2000]: 169–88; and now idem, "A New Reading of the Letter of Ammonius to Apollonius, the Gospel of Mark, and the Dangers of Early Christian Communities in Egypt," lecture presented at the FIEC Conference, Berlin 24–29 August 2009, forthcoming). I found Wilhite's considerations on the value of *sacramentum* in Tertullian as a military oath (163) valuable; they go much in the same direction of what I have argued in a study of the terms *sacramentum* and *mysterium* in the Latin versions of the Bible and in early African Fathers ("*Sacramentum e mysterium* negli autori cristiani di area africana: Tertulliano, Arnobio, Lattanzio, Zenone di Verona," in *Il mistero nella carne: Contributi su Mysterion e Sacramentum nei primi secoli cristiani* [ed. Angela M. Mazzanti; Castel Bolognese: Itaca, 2003], 81–104).

The conclusions of the whole work are presented in chapter 7 (177–91), where Wilhite concentrates on disciplinary frameworks for recontextualizing Tertullian and summarizes the conclusions that he has reached in the course of his research on the *realia* of Tertullian's life: he probably was a new elite and benefited from high-level education; his knowledge of philosophy is beyond question, although it does not imply an affiliation to a philosophical school. Even Osborn admits that his Stoic ideas do not derive from a direct reading, say, of the works of Chrysippus. It is probable that he converted to Christianity at some point of his life. The apparent contradiction between statements from which it results that he was a layman and others that suggest that he was an official within his congregation can be solved in the light of the phenomenon—especially studied by Alistair Stewart-Sykes—of African lay elders, who preached and governed but could perform no sacramental rites. The category of "African theology" is discussed as well, and patristic

scholars are invited by Wilhite to incorporate social anthropology in their studies; the present investigation offers an example of how patristics can benefit from such incorporation.

The bibliography (193–225) is wide-ranging and divided into a general bibliography and a list of ancient authors and works with their editions and translations. The index (227–32) is likewise double: one is devoted to “subjects” and also includes ancient authors and places; the other is of modern authors.

I found a few typos; e.g., on page 224: *Caeam* for *Caesarem*; *ecclesiatica* instead of *ecclesiastica*; “Origin” for “Origen” (also on 219 and 229, where the reference to 223 should also be corrected to 224); *Passio sanctorum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* instead of *Passio sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*; *Testominia* for *Testimonia*. Just some other sample pages: on 20, Ῥωμαίων instead of Ῥωμαίων and τὰ τε for τὰ τε; on 21 *Sonderprache* for *Sondersprache*; on 25 *Monogomia* for *Monogamia*, and *ad Quoduultdeus* for *ad Quoduultdeum*; on 81 “what do they give rise too?” for “what do they give rise to?”. Such small editorial shortcomings, however, do not detract in any way from the value and the interest of the present contribution.