

## TRAINING FOR CHRISTIAN IDENTITY: SPIRITUAL EXERCISES IN TERTULLIAN

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### INTRODUCTION

The tradition of 'spiritual exercises' in antiquity has stimulated considerable interest. We appreciate the work of Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris 1993), in which he captures a complex set of the exercises and defines it as a 'profound transformation of the individual's mode of seeing and being'. Though some scholars have often investigated the intellectual training of mind, the simplistic approach is problematic and merits careful deliberation. Hadot emphasises the need to consider a wider diversity of the training within the very context of involving all facets of human thought and behaviour. Indeed, the exercises vary according to the circumstances of a Greco-Roman tradition. It is noteworthy that, among early Christian thinkers, while Justin argues that philosophical investigation can lead Christians to a better appreciation of divine truth, Tertullian speaks against its theoretical claims. But although Tertullian exclaims that divine truth is found in Jerusalem rather than Athens (*On the Prescriptions of Heretics* 7.9), he understands Christian martyr acts as indispensable vehicles for the articulation of Christian identities and, therefore, as working to shape their perceptions of the way of life in this world: the seed of the Church is the blood of Christian martyrs (*Apology* 50.13). In this paper I shall focus on Tertullian's references to the spiritual exercises, thereby coming to some understanding of the horizons on which Tertullian makes use of the dimension and goal in speaking about the exercises, and considering how these might have affected his dealings with the appropriate attitude towards temporal realities.

### ABSTINENCE, PRAYER, AND MARTYRDOM

First I aim to consider his view of the spiritual exercises from its moral and practical perspectives, thereby illuminating the prevalence of some instances of exercises in his works.

In the *To his Wife*, written after 198, Tertullian entangles himself with the question how coherent the goodness of marriage is with Paul's preference for celibacy (1 Cor 7:1). This epistolary message to his own wife demands a compelling justification from those both marry first and marry a second time. While he concedes that his wife might remarry, like other Christian women who would be a widow after divorce or death of their husbands, yet by following 'the examples of sisters of ours whose name are with

the Lord' (*To his Wife* 1.4.3), who would rather be nothing than not belong wholly to God, he hopes for and expects her to be resolute enough to remain a widow:

Training yourself to an emulation of (their) constancy by the examples of such women, you will by spiritual affection bury that fleshly concupiscence, in abolishing the temporal and fleeting desires of beauty and youth by the compensating gain of immortal blessings. (*To his Wife* 1.4.5)

His repeated arguments against fleshly concupiscence seem to indicate it to be the standard treatment of the desire for temporal things. Not only is Tertullian persistent in his attitude and strongly advises against remarriage in his work addressed some years later to a widower (*On Exhortation to Chastity*), but also in his later works, as for example in the second book of *Against Marcion* (2.18.2) and *On fasting* (5.4; 13.5), explicitly does he ever mention the idea that the exercise of self-restraint would be the efficient remedy for those determined to live in accordance with divine prescription.

It is interesting to note that, in his letter to a widower (*On Exhortation to Chastity*), Tertullian tells us the close relationship between the abstinence and the prayer for each individual (10.2). Comparing between carnal desires and spiritual fruits, he draws his attention to the conscience itself, and then enumerating a sequence of spiritual practises in their own right: 'If he is making prayer to the Lord, he is near heaven.'

Accordingly, the apostle added (the recommendation of) a temporary abstinence for the sake of adding an efficacy to prayers (1 Cor 7:5), that we might know that what is profitable 'for a time' should be always practised by us, that it may be always profitable. (*On Exhortation to Chastity* 10.2)

As he has already reflected, even more practically, on the mental attitude prerequisite for prayer, Tertullian argues about the coherence of prayer with the exercise of abstinence in daily life. He begins by the sustained discipline of desires, which supports faith and permits the leading of a spiritual life towards heaven: 'Prayer proceeds from conscience.' His awareness that a Christian's proclamation must be put into practice is evident. Also in his pre-Montanist period, Tertullian rhetorically makes clear the linkage between the practice of almsgiving and the exercise of patience which works as the key to nourish all forms of virtuous conduct.

In truth, I know not whether he who has not made up his mind to endure with constancy the loss of somewhat of his, ...would himself readily or heartily lay hand on his own property in the cause of almsgiving:... Patience in losses is an exercise in bestowing and communicating. ...how will one, when he has two coats, give the one of sasthem to the naked (Luke 3:11), unless he be a man likewise to offer to one who takes away his coat his cloak as well (Matth 5:40; Luke 6:29)? How shall we fashion to us friends from mammon (Luke 16:9), if we love it so much as not to put up with its loss? We shall perish together with the lost mammon. (*On Patience* 7.8-10)

Here he does not describe the concrete situation of poor in his community. What we would rather see through his message is that he praises those who give alms to the destitute and practise the act of dispossession for cultivating thoroughly their patience

to endure. Although he in no way explains how there is anything specific about making friends out of mammon, he reminds us of the necessity of reciprocal charity and its accompanying exercises as the means of solidarity in the community.

In the *To the Martyrs*, which was written probably before *Apology*, addressed to Christians awaiting execution for their faith, Tertullian refers to the exercise of tribulations and trials as a necessary Christian duty. He encourages the future martyrs to regard their imprisoned state as a drill of mind and body:

O blessed ones, count whatever is hard in this lot of yours as a discipline of your powers of mind and body. You are about to pass through a noble struggle, in which the living God acts the part of superintendent, in which the Holy Ghost is your trainer, ... Therefore your Master, Jesus Christ, who has anointed you with His Spirit, and led you forth to the arena, has seen it good, before the day of conflict, to take you from a condition more pleasant in itself, and has imposed on you a harder treatment, that your strength might be the greater. ... 'And they,' says the apostle, 'that they may obtain a corruptible crown (1 Cor 9:25).' We, with the crown eternal in our eye, look upon the prison as our training-ground, that at the goal of final judgment we may be brought forth well disciplined by many a trial. (*To the Martyrs* 3.3-5)

Tertullian uses the expressions to describe athletes (and soldiers), thereby telling prospective martyrs to prepare themselves for martyrdom. These types of language were, indeed, not uncommon in ancient Christian texts. Presumably, although most Christians who understood examples of martyrs from life or from literary works did not consider themselves as preparing for their real death, martyrdom itself could be presumed as an undertaking that required the exercises for their 'suffering' selves. Indeed, Tertullian holds that Christians are provided with ample opportunity to advance in virtue through trials and sufferings. At the same time, however, he argues that martyrdom is an immediate duty for Christians. Their struggle would take on an eschatological dimension: both with God as producer of the games (*agonothetes*) and with the Holy Spirit as the trainer (*xystarches*), they are prompted to prepare for martyrdom, with the hope of receiving the eternal reward. Furthermore, his enthusiasm and eagerness for their absolute commitment are elicited from his reference to the 'peace' to be kept in the church (*To the Martyrs* 1.6). It seems that Tertullian spoke of the reconciliation to the church of those who had lapsed. For, through their willingness to undergo martyrdom, lapsed Christians were vested with an exceptional means, by thus being able to effect forgiveness. They were regarded as having got a vehicle to absolve their own sins. All of this suggests that, despite the differences between most of Christian readers and imprisoned martyrs, Tertullian sees Christian identity as being shaped from their perceptions of the 'suffering' selves.

#### INTELLECTUAL ASPECT OF THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Tertullian's attitude towards the intellectual aspect of exercises becomes clear from several passages in his relatively early works. For example, in the *On the Testimony of*

*the Soul* which was written in 197/198 as an appendix to the *Apology*, he explicitly refers to its dimension:

I do not summon you as one formed by schooling, instructed by libraries, nurtured by Platonic and Stoic academies that you may trumpet your wisdom. I invoked you in your simple, unfinished, untutored, unformed nature — such as you are for those who have only you alone. Such as you are at the crossroads, on the street, in the workshop. (*On the Testimony of the Soul* 1.6)

In this short treatise, intended to be read by the ordinary reader than by the learned for whom he wrote the *Apology*, he directs sharp criticism at philosophy. Very distinct and vigorous is the protest he utters against the tendency to search for factors of Christian truth in the writings of the ‘philosophers, the poets, or the masters of worldly learning and wisdom’ (*On the Testimony of the Soul* 1.1). Therefore, he asks the educated pagans to be plain, unadorned, and uncorrupted by learning. This is the soul of the ordinary people, which at its deepest level has an entity inclined towards Christianity.

Also in his *On the Prescriptions of Heretics*, written after 198, in which he is concerned about the way how the learned heretic makes use of the scriptures with the teaching of the various philosophical schools (*On the Prescriptions of Heretics* 7), Tertullian makes the claim that, because of their curious and endless search for belief, their use of the scriptures is unsanctioned and ultimately powerless. After introducing the rule of faith as an essential guide for belief (*On the Prescriptions of Heretics* 13), he admits the existence of well-educated brothers:

You have at hand, no doubt, some learned brother gifted with the grace of knowledge, some one of the experienced class, some one of your close acquaintance who is curious like yourself; although with yourself, a seeker he will, after all, be quite aware that it is better for you to remain in ignorance, lest you should come to know what you ought not, because you have acquired the knowledge of what you ought to know. (*On the Prescriptions of Heretics* 14.2)

His encouragement to the reader, then, comes to be liked to the argumentation that there can be no effective inquiry without the rule of faith. Tertullian recapitulates his idea of an appropriate use of the scriptures, quoting the Lukan passage and emphasizing both the danger of curiosity and the redundant ability to expose the scriptures:

‘Thy faith,’ He says, ‘hath saved thee’ (Luke 18:42) not observe your skill in the Scriptures. Now, faith has been deposited in the rule; it has a law, and (in the observance thereof) salvation. Skill, however, consists in curious art, having for its glory simply the readiness that comes from knack. Let such curious art give place to faith; let such glory yield to salvation. (*On the Prescriptions of Heretics* 14.3-5)

Tertullian’s disapproval of the scriptural exercises appears again in the attack on some of heretics who are willingly to enlarge or diminish the scriptural texts.

They rely on those which they have falsely put together, and which they have selected, because of their ambiguity. Though most skilled in the Scriptures, you will make no progress, when

everything which you maintain is denied on the other side, and whatever you deny is (by them) maintained. (*On the Prescriptions of Heretics* 17.3-4)

Although the debate with heretics about their dealings with scriptural texts must not be based on these texts, where the 'victory will either be impossible, or uncertain, or not certain enough' (*On the Prescriptions of Heretics* 19.1), there is consequently a risk of showing that a critical interpretation of the scriptures is not contradicted by the rule of faith. He is not satisfied with such argument as this, however, his negative assessment of the exercises would be clear to the reader. In his writings, there is indeed continuing, even if sporadic, criticism of the exercises in its intellectual aspect. At the centre of the problem lies Tertullian's almost dismissive attitude towards the philosophical thought within which the various types of philosophical endeavour were divergent in his times: philosophy creates more uncertainty and confusion than simplicity and clearness: it could 'condemn the truth from the different ways in which it is defended' (*Apology*, 47.9).

However, a further characteristic of his view of the exercises must not be ignored: in order to exercise the virtuous conducts, one is urged to accept divine discipline, and to discipline themselves.

To us no human affectation of canine equanimity, modelled by insensibility, furnishes the warrant for exercising patience; but the divine arrangement of a living and celestial discipline, holding up before us God Himself in the very first place as an example of patience (*On Patience* 2.1)

[I]t is our duty so to walk in the Lord's discipline as is 'worthy,' not according to the filthy concupiscences of the flesh. For so, too, does the apostle say, that 'to savour according to the flesh is death, but to savour according to the spirit is life eternal in Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 8:5-6).' (*On Exhortation to Chastity* 10.4-5)

It is clearly admitted that in these passages he does not refer to the intellectual aspect of the exercises. Both in the cultivation of patience and of chastity, he admits the need of abandoning the carnal desires. It may be safely assumed that here Tertullian renders the word '*disciplina*' to be more practical rather than theoretical. Yet, in order to discipline oneself against desires in daily life, one should comprehend what the discipline is and is not. The need to understand the discipline takes precedence over the need to follow the rule and custom by which Christians have lived their way of life. Any practice must be good only in so far as it is justified by reason or argument (*On the Military Crown* 4.7, 10.9; *On Fasting* 3.1, 10.9). Thus, one should prepare oneself to make a rational choice of the course of one's entire life. As a rational being, one should be ready to 'walk in the Lord's discipline as is "worthy"'. This implies that the demands of the training of mind and reason would be intentionally suppressed in a way that serves to emphasise the simply way of living and to turn the audience's attention to its conformity with the rule of faith (*On the Prescriptions of Heretics* 1-2).

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Tertullian's writings I have considered so far give a sporadic spread more or less over his author's period, which is dated to the period from around 197 to 213. With regard to his references to the spiritual exercises, I have seen his consistent interest in the exercises in its ascetic aspect. There is the earliest evidences in which Tertullian exhorts prospective martyrs to regard their circumstances as a training of mind and body (*To the Martyrs*). The emphasis throughout is on the idea of how Christians live in accordance with divine precept. His sustained concern for the same mode of exercise of the self-restraint remains in his later writings (*On Fasting*). Although the question of his works' chronology is complicated and led to much discussion, it would be realised that, to a certain degree, we have not obtained the confirmation of a chronological development in his view of these exercises.

The distinguishing characteristic of the spiritual exercises is his clear disapproval of the exercises in both its intellectual and exegetical aspect. Tertullian repeatedly expresses his objection to these sorts of exercises, thereby enjoining the reader to ignore them, even though in his community there exists those who have been disciplined enough to interpret the difficult passages of the scriptures. Also accepted is the statement that these exercises provide inadequate training to cultivate the curiosity, feeding their propensity to engage in the endless search for the truth. He is constantly trying to encourage the audience to extract themselves from the situation with confusion and controversy. However, it seems that Tertullian is not so much anti-rational but rather would show them how to find a secure and stable way of life: Christians should live in such a way as to see both individual and community from a rational point of view dependent on the divine discipline. This rationality means developing a reason based on faith—which habitually turns their attentions to moral behaviour and spiritual testimony—so that they might view things from the perspective of its discipline. Indeed, as some scholars have suggested, the frequent use of the '*disciplina*' in his writings tells us its double meaning: teaching/doctrine and precept/practical prescriptions. Thus, although the explanation given for the exercises is intentionally focused on its practical aspect, it does not just make a choice between teaching and practice. His understanding of the spiritual exercises seems to serve to construct the 'rational self' who should be primarily justified by its accord with the rule of faith.