

The Basis for Christian Identity: 'Spiritual Exercises' in the North African Church AD 250–320

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INTRODUCTION

The tradition of the 'spiritual exercises' in the late antique society, the one which has attracted considerable interest among scholars, in particular when we appreciate Pierre Hadot's work (*Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 1993), in which he illustrates a complex set of modes of the exercises and defines it as a 'metamorphosis of our personality'. Some scholars have often considered it as the intellectual training of the mind. Primary attention should be given to it. All the same, the simplistic approach merits careful deliberation. Hadot emphasises the need to investigate a wider diversity of the training within the very context of involving all facets of human thought and behaviour. It is interesting that, while Justin argued that philosophical investigation could lead Christians to a better appreciation of divine truth, Tertullian spoke against its ethical claims. He regarded Christian martyr acts as indispensable vehicles for the articulation of the Christian identity and, thus, as working to shape their perceptions of the way of life in this world. What did other Christian writers of the North African church think about the exercises? In this paper I shall focus on the writings of Cyprian and Lactantius, thereby coming to some understanding of the horizons on which they make use of the dimension and goal in speaking about the exercises.

IN THE WRITINGS OF CYPRIAN

Cyprian of Carthage is the second, distinguished theologian in the church of Africa, whose personality is totally dissimilar from Tertullian, the first Latin theologian and apologist. Cyprian does not have the strength of legal mind shown by Tertullian, in order to enter the service of the church, under the empire-driven persecutions of Christians. He would rather instil the spirit of union and harmony among his congregations. Yet, it is interesting to note that, according to the testimony of Jerome (*De uiris inlustribus* 53), Cyprian himself affirms the supremacy of Tertullian as the 'master' in his writing activity. Then, concerning the dealing with the spiritual exercises, does he entirely follow the view of Tertullian?

By the end of 250 the Decian persecution has gradually waned, but another horrible epidemic made a death threat to the whole community in Africa. Thus, in *On Mortality* written around in 252, Cyprian concerns himself with the question of knowing what it means for the faithful to suffer the punishment of death. He encourages Christians to shut out the fear of death despite their suffering from incurable disease. In the

exhortation to his fellow Christians, he regards the apparently horrible plague not as correction of sinners but as the ‘mortality’ examining the state of their minds: it is compared to the ‘martyrdom ... training for us, not deaths (funera)’ (*De mortalitate* 16), being inspired and constituted by divine grace. Also in his treatise *On Jealousy and Envy*, written probably in 256/257, Cyprian is concerned about the way how the devil aroused jealousy and envy, provided a further source of vices and carnal sins, and violated the ‘bond of the Lord’s peace’ (*De zero et livore* 6). He lists, therefore, the benefit and impact of the meditative exercises against such evil tendencies as sickness of the soul.

By exercises of this kind it must be confirmed against all the darts of the devil. Let there be the divine reading in the hands, the Lord’s thoughts in the mind; let constant prayer never cease at all; let saving labour persevere. (*De zero et livore* 16)

Cyprian corpus of *Letters* comprises an inexhaustible source of the time dated from being appointed bishop of Carthage in 248/249. Of the eighty-one letters of the corpus, Cyprian’s view of the spiritual exercises becomes clear from several passages in his relatively early correspondence. For example, in *Letter 25*, dating in approximately 250, replied to his brother’s message (*Ep.* 24), Cyprian expresses a positive attitude towards the intellectual aspect of the exercises. In the greeting of this short letter, he admires the way his brother restores peace to the congregations in the urgency of a new persecution, because Caldonius has been ‘so well trained and versed in the Scriptures of the Lord’ (*Ep.* 25). Cyprian regards his divine reading as the vehicle of divine aid to grant peace to his colleagues.

In *Letter 58*, dating in probably 253, addressed to the North African community at Thibaris (modern Thibar), Cyprian exhorts his ‘dearly beloved brethren’ to remain faithful to God and the Church in a renewal of persecution. His words draw upon the imagery from the ‘secular combat’ in the arena to be prepared and trained for the terror of future persecution. Despite of the imminent coming of Antichrist, no one should ‘be so terrified by the feat of future persecution or the coming of the threatening Antichrist’ (*Ep.* 58.7). Adopting a Stoic view of the world and quoting the passages from Ephesians (6: 12-17), he speaks of the virtue-oriented aspect of the exercises.

Men are tried and prepared for the secular combat and think it great glory of their honor if it happens to them to be crowned with the people looking on and the emperor present. Let us be armed with all strength Let us take these arms; let us fortify ourselves with spiritual and heavenly safeguards that we may be able to fight back and to resist the threats of the devil in that most evil day. (*Ep.* 58.8-9)

IN THE WRITINGS OF LACTANTIUS

Lactantius is also a leading theologian and one of the earliest Latin writers, whose elegant and excellent style would be derived from educational practices in philosophy,

thereby being called ‘the Christian Cicero’. He was a native African, and the last Latin apologist personally affected by the persecution of Christians. Perhaps before the beginning of the Diocletian persecution in February 303, converted to Christianity, and under the persecution he was forced to resign his position as a professor of rhetoric. Yet this was the most productive period. During the persecution (303-313), he would spend much of his time writing treatises, in 303/304 an apologetic treatise *De opificio dei* was written, then in 304-311 his main work, seven books of the *Divinae Institutiones*, was completed. Apart from his *magnum opus*, a small fragment with the marginal inscription ‘*Lactantius de motibus animi*’ provides a valuable description of the exercises in question. Since its content and form suggest the authorship of Lactantius, it is likely that he writes these lines as a complement to the *De opificio dei*. In this note, he treats the motions of the soul and considers their origin as being planted into human nature by God. Clearly adopting the Ciceronian account of the virtues, soul, and its order, he confirms the significance and consequence of the exercises of virtue ‘in accordance with reason’: ‘man may be able to exercise those good qualities by means of which he would justly have deserved to receive from the Lord eternal life’ (*Frag.* 1).

Responding to the accusations against Christians, in particular soon after the Diocletian persecution started in 303, Lactantius engages in writing the *Divine Institutes*. Not only does he object to the hostile campaign vigorously promoted by pagans, but he intends to set forth the systematic, structured in the Ciceronian style, religious instruction of Christian doctrine and worship, thereby persuading the learned pagans that only Christianity is capable of telling the truth. In the preface of Book 1, in which he attempts to refute polytheism, Lactantius distinguishes the teaching of between speaking well and living well. Since the latter concerns all and the former concerns a few, and since, as he has seen, the former often trained the youth to be wicked, living well is far superior to the knowledge of eloquence. He claims, however, that the practice of oratory has helped us considerably: it would ‘flow with great power into the minds of men’ (*Div. inst.* 1.1) and direct them towards true wisdom and religion.

In Book 3, Lactantius focuses on the errors of philosophers’ teachings on ethics, stating that the virtues are the vehicle for the acquisition of the soul’s immortality, not the objective itself of life. It is admitted that, along with his interest in virtue, he persistently speak of the exercises combined with the cultivation of virtues. In 3.12, after drawing the outline of moral philosophy—the Stoics, Cyrenaics, and Academics, he explains the nature of the good and defines immortality as the highest good. Only in the liberation of the soul from the body, the happiness consists in this life. He encourages those who hope for it to live in the labours and burdens, because it nourishes and strengthen the virtues, and ‘that rugged and difficult path which has been opened for us happiness’ (3.12). A linkage between the exercise, virtues, and the immortality works as the key to define the secure way of life for them. From the viewpoint of this relationship, he turns his attention to the teachings of Lucretius, Seneca, and Cicero, then proceeds to examine those of Epicurus, Leucippus, and

Democritus as sources of error. Although there are no detailed descriptions about the exercises, the repeated references to the benefit of the exercises of virtue are given, when he determines the harmful results, for instance, from the excessive engagement on the practice of speaking (3.16) and the Epicurean hedonism (3.17).

It is noteworthy that, in both the end of Book 3 (3.29) and Book 5 (5.23), Lactantius is concerned about the basis for persecution. Although it seems that the sufferings of the Christians are at the hands of criminal persecutors, Lactantius quotes a passage from Seneca.

He often chastises the good whom He loves, and by continual labours exercises them to the practice of virtue; nor does he permit them to be corrupted and depraved by frail and perishable goods. (*Div. inst.* 5.23)

He follows the idea of Seneca, in which the virtue of fortitude shifts the focus from representative of physical courage to the endurance of torture, and considers further that the suffering of the good is part of divine plan to keep his people free from corruption. Thus, the exercises of virtue are involved in the process of the embodiment of divine justice. In the introductory part of Book 7, he speaks again about the close relationship between the exercise of virtues and its significance. Because of his intention to deal with the path to beatitude from the eschatological viewpoint, Lactantius emphasises on the divine arrangement of the world and the rational judgement of good and evil things. Indeed, in the diversity of the world, the long-continued exercises of the reason and virtues are indispensable for knowing and seeking the good. Here the bond of the reason and the virtue seems to have combined to show the necessity of the continual commitment to the exercises.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Both Cyprian's and Lactantius's writings I have examined so far give an occasional spread, yet restricted to the relatively short period of their writing activities. Cyprian's references to these exercises are found mainly in the decade after he was appointed the bishop in 248/249. Lactantius's remarks on these exercises are made almost in his *magnum opus*, *Divinae Institutiones* (304-311), except a passage from the fragment, which seems to be a complement to *De opificio dei*. With regard to the characteristics of these references, I have found their consistent interest in the exercises in its ascetic aspect. There are some evidences which both exhort their fellow Christians to regard their circumstances as a training for their state of mind. The emphasis throughout is on the view of how Christian should live in accordance with the workings of divine justice. In this regard, Cyprian, Lactantius, and Tertullian give similar descriptions of the exercises of the reason and virtues from the eschatological point of view. In its intellectual aspect, both Cyprian and Lactantius express a positive attitude towards these sorts of exercise, while Tertullian often shows his disapproval of these exercises.

However, it seems that Tertullian is not so much anti-rational but would show his congregations how to find a secure and stable way of life. Thus, although these explanations given are mostly focused on its practical aspect, their views of the exercises would serve to construct the rational self who should be principally in accord with their faith.