

Tertullian's Understanding of Sacred Places and the Differentiation of Christians from Pagans

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With the continued expansion of Christianity in Roman North Africa, violence and harassment affected the Christian community. Tertullian of Carthage referred both to these times of persecution, and to the reality of Christian groups in the Roman provinces of Proconsular Africa, Numidia, and Mauretania. He considered the struggles and conflicts between Christians and non-Christians as a stimulus for believers of the Christian God to distance themselves from defenders of the traditional gods of Rome and Africa, in particular, idolaters. It is noteworthy that the eager for distinction enables us to perceive significant changes of a spatial sensibility from the late second century. While this desire for differentiation is often evident in the case of martyrdom in the writings of Tertullian, his description of Christian worship suggests a new mapping of sacred places to be productive for Christian identification. Tertullian designated individual tombs and places of assembly as Christian. He connected the *ecclesia* with a physical place. In the paper which follows I have confined myself first to the description of the 'house of God' (*domus dei*) in his writings, and secondary to the correlation between the *ecclesia* and an edifice. Finally, I shall deal with the way in which both internal and external identification of Christians was formed, together with conceptions of sacred place.

Heavenly to locative vision of the places

Christians in the late antique Roman world employed many terms to designate holy places. By examining the literary sources of the second- and early third centuries, some scholars suggest that North African writers associated the term *ecclesia* with both the concrete and metaphoric meanings of holy places and, concurrently, following the scriptures, identified the places of Christian assembly as a 'house of God'. Indeed, while apologetic writers rejected the localisation of divinity as conceived by those adhering to ritual practices, others claimed their gathering places as separated from pagan sites. Although a fundamental transformation of Christian spatiality occurred in the fourth century, we may find an ambivalent but perceptual shift in the writings of Tertullian. In *The Chaplet*, he defines a church as its permanence to live in the afterlife.

However, your orders and your magistracies and the very name of the place in which you meet, the church, all are Christ's (*Sed tui ordines et tui magistratus et ipsum curiae nomen ecclesia est Christi*). For you are His, inscribed in the Book of Life. [...] But you are a mere pilgrim in this world and your city is the heavenly Jerusalem. St. Paul tells us: 'But our citizenship is of heaven.' You have your own citizen lists, your own calendar, and you have no part in the joys of this world; in fact, quite the contrary.¹

Tertullian uses imagery taken from a group of themes to express the 'world' (*saeculum, mundus*) negatively. He demonises the Roman politics, society and religion. Rome is occasionally compared with Babylon. At the same time, the church is designated 'city' (*ciuitas*) or house of God. His use of the image of a Christian city constructs the identity of the Christian community as a spiritual and permanent entity in heaven.

In *On the Soul*, Tertullian considers 'the joining of heaven and earth' by referring to the passage from Genesis 28:12, 'And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!'

How does it happen that so few people know about it [*sc. marvellous virtue of water*] or use it? This leads me to suspect the existence of this sacrament which has the power of making us so wonderfully secure and immune from death. Why, this would even dispense us from the law of dying for God, when, on the contrary, all nations have 'to ascend the mount of the Lord and to the house of the God of Jacob (*ascendant in montem domini et in aedem dei Iacob*),' who demands death by martyrdom from His own and exacted it even from Christ.²

His reading becomes evident when we compare with it *Flight in Time of Persecution*³ and *Against Marcion*.⁴ Tertullian interprets Jacob's ladder leading to heaven as a figure of divine judgement and a model of martyrdom (*ascensus in caelum*): those who ascend are the Christians who are willing to die for their faith. In this connection, he regards the ladder as the means by which souls pass into the 'house of the God' where divinity abides. This heavenly realm is accessible only to those who transcend the fear of death and the bounds of the physical world. The holy 'place' does not appear in the spatial realm as a material objective.

In *On Idolatry*, Tertullian considered a definition of idolatry and sought to

1. *De corona militis* 13.1, 4; FC 40, 261, 262.

2. *De anima* 50.4; FC 10, 289–290.

3. *De fuga persecutione* 1.4; FC 40, 276: 'a persecution is a "judgment," and the verdict is either approval or condemnation. To be sure, to God alone it belongs to judge, [...] This judgment, too, is the ladder of which Jacob dreamed, on which some are ascending on high, while others descend below.'

4. *Aduersus Marcionem* 3.24; Evans 1972, 251: 'when Jacob dreams of a ladder set firm on earth up to heaven, and of angels some ascending and others descending, and of the Lord standing above it, shall we perchance be rash in our interpretation that by this ladder it is indicated that a road to heaven, by which some arrive there, but from which others fall away, has been set up by the Lord's judgement?'

condemn what he regards as idolatry: 'in idolatry all crimes are detected, and in all crimes idolatry'.⁵ When he argues against the makers of idols who strive for continuing the exercise of their art, Tertullian identifies them as the ones who fail to uphold disciplinary matters of the community.

We will certainly take more pains in answering the excuses of artificers of this kind, who ought never to be admitted into the house of God (*numquam in domum dei admitti oportet*), if any have a knowledge of that Discipline.⁶

While, as in *To the Wife*,⁷ he uses here the term *domus dei* as applied to the community of Christians, he contrasts the house of God with 'an adversary', that is, idol workshops in the following chapter 7.

A whole day the zeal of faith will direct its pleadings to this quarter: bewailing that a Christian should come from idols into the Church; should come from an adversary workshop into the house of God (*de aduersaria officina in domum dei uenire*); should raise to God the Father hands which are the mothers of idols; should pray to God with the hands which, out of doors, are prayed to in opposition to God; should apply to the Lord's body those hands which confer bodies on demons. Nor is this sufficient.⁸

Tertullian assumes that Christians conduct the eucharist every day of the week before dawn.⁹ It is also evident from this scene that he speaks about various activities occurring in the church and the eucharistic assembly at the house of God.¹⁰ He thus disagrees with any connection of the house of God with any and all activity like worshipping idols. So from a sharp distinction between the Christian meeting place and idol workshops we arrive at a sense of holy places: this sense makes Christians perceive the assembly where they gather for prayer as holy. While he rebukes the Christians who believe that they can go to the workshops of the adversary without breaking their faith, Tertullian moves perceptibly from a radical contrast between the worship of God and idolatry to a spatial sensibility by which he makes a difference between these two places: 'we keep ourselves separate from idolatry'.¹¹ The emphasis on the crime of idolatry leads us into thinking that the valuation involved in this differentiation is not relative but absolute.

5. *De idololatria* 1.5.

6. *De idololatria* 5.1; ANF 3, 63.

7. *Ad uxorem* 2.8.3; ACW 13, 34: 'Churches seem contemptible to women such as these, since they will hardly find a rich man in the house of God, and, if they do, he will hardly ever be unmarried'.

8. *De idololatria* 7.1; ANF 3, 64.

9. *De oratione* 19, *Apologeticum* 7.4, and *Ad Nationes* 1.7.

10. *De idololatria* 7.1-3.

11. *De idololatria* 15.8.

Ecclesia and the church as mother

Part of the legacy Tertullian left to the ecclesiological framework of North African Christianity was the application of the title 'mater' to the church. Not only does he use it consistently and with an emphasis on his view of the church as a source of teaching and comfort, but he is the first to make a clear link between the motherhood of the church and the fatherhood of God. In *The Prescription Against Heretics*, Tertullian applies the maternal metaphor by which he confirms that true motherhood is exclusively confined to the church. He juxtaposes the uncontrolled state of heretics with the disciplined Christian practice.

In short, all heresies, when thoroughly looked into, are detected harbouring dissent in many particulars even from their own founders. The majority of them have not even churches. Motherless, houseless, creedless, outcasts, they wander about in their own essential worthlessness.¹²

Those who would claim to be a child of God ought to be kept in proper relationship to 'mother'. Their affinity is confirmed by the consensus to be reached in harmony with the rule of faith. Although heretics manage to maintain the connection with 'mother', the lack of their involvement put them outside the church. They are alienated from the source of divine life. They are thus differentiated from those inside the unity of the church because of the exclusive nature of the church.

Also in *Prayer*, Tertullian employs the image of the church as mother, together with the explicit connection with that of God as father. The way he refers to the familial association suggests that he correlates the 'mother' with the concept of family, in particular with the importance of fellowship and inheritance derived from being part of a family.

Nor is Mother Church passed over without mention, for in the Son and the Father the Mother is recognized, since upon her the terms 'Father' and 'Son' depend for their meaning.¹³

Tertullian is dealing with the paring of the church the mother on earth and God the Father in heaven as if without the motherhood of the church we could not have the fatherhood. The former becomes a requisite for the latter. It is without the acceptance of the church we cannot become children of God, or rather that in calling upon God as father people can recognise the church as mother. What comes from the passage of Tertullian is a view that those who realise the nature of the church with God can be regarded as the one who participates in the connection between the church and God properly.

12. *De praescriptione haereticorum* 42.9–10; ANF 3, 264.

13. *De oratione* 2.6; FC 40, 160.

There are some references where Tertullian uses the maternal image of the church in his concern about the ritual places. Both in *To the Martyrs* and *Monogamy*,¹⁴ the imagery of the church as the mother is repeated and forms his understanding and its maternal role. At the end of his treatise *On Baptism*, Tertullian exhorts the neophytes and draws their attention to the moment when they come from the washing of new birth and gather in their mother's house.

Therefore, you blessed ones, for whom the grace of God is waiting, when you come up from that most sacred washing of the new birth, and when for the first time you spread out your hands with your brethren in your mother's house, ask of your Father, ask of your Lord, that special grants of grace and apportionments of spiritual gifts be yours.¹⁵

This passage tells us that the basic elements of Christian initiation were water baptism, 'inviting and welcoming the Holy Spirit'.¹⁶ A believer had this experience after being received as a catechumen for several years. The expression 'in your mother's house' is reasonable to interpret as a reference to the church both as the place in which to offer prayers and as the mystery of divine grace. This quotation suggests the movement of the neophytes from the baptistery after the rite of baptism to the building of the church, conceived as both building and the Christian community, where they received their first eucharist. Although there is an interpretation of this phrase (*apud matrem*), one that does not explain it in a locative sense, it is likely that here within the connection of *mater* with *apud* Tertullian differentiates the physical place from the mother as a metaphor. Indeed, the situation is illustrated by the form of many North African baptisteries. As though it were well-known to them all, he takes the phrase to mean the church without any further comment.

In his work *On Purity*, Tertullian refers to the term *ecclesia* in association with an actual edifice. He is dealing with the excommunication of unnatural offenders against morality.

But all other frenzied lust, vicious and unnatural uses of the body and of sex, we banish not only from the threshold of the Church but also from any shelter within it (*non modo limine, uerum omni ecclesiae tecto*), since they are not sins but rather monstrosities.¹⁷

Here these terms 'threshold' and 'roof', that is, part of the whole building of the church, are employed to describe the architectural features of the edifice. It is evident from this passage that sinners guilty of inexcusable acts (*i.e.* adultery and fornication) are excluded not only from the church entrance but also from the vestibule. They would not be considered equal in status with penitents. Indeed,

14. *Ad martyras* 1.1 and *De monogamia* 7.9.

15. *De baptismo* 20.5; Evans 1964, 43.

16. *De baptismo* 8.1.

17. *De pudicitia* 4.5; ACW 28, 62.

Tertullian indicated in his other treatise that those penitents were able to do public repentance in the vestibule.¹⁸ They were accepted to do it under the shelter of the church, yet 'the door of forgiveness' (*ianua ignoscentiae*) was not opened to them. Accordingly, he contrasts the 'threshold' of the church with the 'roof' and its exterior area. Despite the fact that there are no structural remains of North African churches from the third century, Tertullian's description of this practice tells us that Carthaginian Christians deployed the physical places for the differentiation and segregation of those who did not follow their morality. Christian assembly spaces can be useful for constructing and maintaining the membership of the community in the church. Those who are allowed to get across the boundary can participate in the ritual and reinforce their group identity.

Concluding remarks

Tertullian's writings I have considered so far indicate how extensive was the use of the church building and Christian assembly for fixing a spatial boundary and constructing the identity of Christians, despite the fact that the Christian sense of holy places in the first three centuries was affected by ambiguity. Under circumstances that North African Christians sought to distinguish themselves at various times and places from their broader social and cultural contexts, their impulse to differentiate themselves from adherents of traditional Roman and indigenous religions led to the evolution of the Christian concept of the meaning of place. As some scholars have proposed, there was a transformation of Christian place meanings from a dwelling-place promised believers in heaven to a holy place that offered Christian sensibilities in its physical form, that is, church buildings and the ritual arenas. Moreover, even before the construction of Christian basilicas in the empire as a result of Constantine's vision in the works of Tertullian, we can see that he, among other Christian writers, first made an association of the *ecclesia* with a building and also employed the term *domus dei* as applied both to the community of Christians and to the assembly place. Although the transformation was still underway in his writings, his emphasis on the mapping of the Carthaginian landscape stimulated the distinction between Christians and other religious communities. Tertullian's portrayal of Christian meeting places served as the delineation of various places which Christians should and should not visit. The landscape he informed Christians how to perceive their cultural and religious environment marked a feature of internal and external identification of Christians in Roman North Africa.

18. *De Paenitentia* 7.10.