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## **Tertullian: 'The father of Christian Latin' or not?**

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My PhD thesis examines the development of Christian expression in Latin up to about the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. Tertullian was, as far as can be ascertained, the first dateable writer in Latin about Christianity. However, most modern studies have focussed on his theology rather than his language. I seek to investigate and evaluate Tertullian's use of language to communicate, defend and argue Christian beliefs. Additionally, considering his vocabulary and literary style; I will also examine the extent to which his writing demonstrates shifts in expression from that of 'classical' writers; the influence of Greek language and the use he makes of what are clearly Biblical citations. Firstly, two questions need to be addressed; a) what is Christian Latin and does it exist? b) who was Tertullian?

The first of these two questions are the more difficult and occupies a large part of my research. Well known are the 'greats' of what is usually termed 'Classical' Latin, Cicero, Caesar, Vergil, Ovid, et al. But what is the first extant mention of Christianity in Latin? Tacitus, Suetonius and Pliny, all of them contemporaries, are the first Latin writers to mention Christianity but this is not 'Christian' writing. The next mention is in a court document 'The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs', which records the trial of seven refusniks in Numidia who, in 180 AD were executed for their Christian beliefs. By the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD Roman territory covered most of North Africa. Although Greek was widely used, this province was much more 'Latinised' than other areas and it is here we find the earliest examples of Christian Latin.

So how far, if at all, does the Latin of Christian writers differ from that of non-Christian writers? This raises a problem, in that there is very little extant 'pagan' Latin with which to compare it, Apuleius being the only significant Latin writer contemporary with Tertullian. Language changes over time, particularly when the necessity of describing and explaining a new field of activity arises. In the study of the evolution of Christian expression in Latin, the problem is to distinguish whether such changes are part of the gradual evolution of the language of the period or

whether these changes should be regarded as facets of a 'new' type of language evolved by early Christian believers.

The most detailed and significant work in the investigation into Christian Latin is found in studies produced by the Nijmegen School of the 1930s onwards. The hypothesis proposed by Josef Schrijnen, theologian, classical and folklore scholar and first rector of the Catholic University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands, in his *Charakteristik des Altchristlichen Latein*<sup>1</sup> and developed by his student, and colleague, Christine Mohrmann,<sup>2 3</sup> maintained that the language of Latin-speaking Christians from about the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD went beyond an extension of contemporary linguistic usage and evolved into a *Sondersprache*, a 'special' language used by a closely-knit Christian society, which related to, but was in many respects different from, the everyday speech of non-Christians. This theory was very influential in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reflecting, particularly in the Netherlands and neighbouring countries, where it originated, the political, religious and social conditions of the time. This theory is followed by L R Palmer, in 'The Latin language' (1954). It has, however been questioned and largely discredited though in recent times there has been some re-examination and re-evaluation of this hypothesis.<sup>4 5</sup>

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (c155 - c240 AD) produced a prolific corpus of apologetic and theological writing. According to Jerome, the only source about Tertullian, stated that he came from Carthage and was a presbyter. Jerome is also considered to be the source of the much-quoted, but much-disputed, reference to Tertullian as the 'father of Christian Latin', *nunc demum primus post Victorem et Apolloniam Latinorum ponitur* (Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus* ch. 53 c. AD 392). The

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<sup>1</sup> Schrijnen, J. *Charakteristik des Altchristlichen Latein*. Latinitas Christianorum Primaeva, Nijmegen: Dekker & van de Vegt et J. W. van Leeuwen, Nijmegen 1932.

<sup>2</sup> Mohrmann, C., How Latin Came to be the Language of Early Christendom, in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 40, No. 159, Sept. 1951, pp 277-288, Irish Province of the Society of Jesus.

<sup>3</sup> Mohrmann, C., les origines de la latinité chretienne à Rome, *Vigiliae Christianae* Vol. 3 No. 2 (April 1949) pp. 57-106.

<sup>4</sup> Coleman, R., Vulgar Latin and the diversity of Christian Latin, in *Actes du 1er Colloque International sur Latin Vulgaire, Latin tardif*, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> Burton, P. H., 2008, *Revisiting the Christian Latin Sondersprache Hypothesis*, in H. Houghton and D. Parker (eds.) *Texts and Studies*, 2008.

paucity of extant non-Christian literature during the same period makes it difficult to evaluate his literary style in a wider context. There is no denying that Tertullian's style of writing is very much *sui generis*, and it has been often regarded as 'difficult'. However, the influence of Tertullian upon the dissemination of Christian thought in Latin, as distinct from Greek, is significant and has importance for the understanding of his theology.

Tertullian's writings include apologetic, polemical works against the theology of his adversaries, and other theological and pastoral treatises. Since new fields of interest require new words, or new meanings there are instances in Tertullian's writing of familiar words with new meanings, new forms of existing words, and completely new words. Also important is the question of how Greek should be rendered into Latin. Tertullian, like many writers, frequently uses words borrowed directly from Greek. Another common usage is a calque. Since Tertullian does not feel it necessary to explain or define these terms, they would probably have been in general circulation in Christian circles.

Tertullian is clearly familiar with Biblical texts. However, an interesting, but difficult question needs to be addressed here; is Tertullian citing a known Latin translation and if so, what translation? Unlike Cyprian, Tertullian's Biblical citations, even from the same passage, vary. Is he producing his own translation from Greek, or is he quoting from memory?

In the title of this abstract I posed the question as to whether Tertullian can be regarded as the 'Father of Christian Latin'? This brief survey of both Christian Latin and of Tertullian, is intended to demonstrate that, whilst Tertullian does indeed make a major contribution to the development of expression of Christianity in Latin, the 'father' appellation is not appropriate. Tertullian is a major figure in the Latin Christian tradition, who uses, adapts and enriches the language of his day to explore and explain the new Christian faith.

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