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THE ASCENSION AND DECLINE OF THE CHURCH
IN THE WORK OF QUINTUS SEPTIMIUS FLORENS
TERTULIANUS (TERTULIAN OF CARTHAGE);
AN ABDUCTIVE EXPLORATION WITH RELEVANCE
TO THE DECLINE OF THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH.

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ABSTRACT: A number of researchers of socio-religious phenomena, such as Mircea Eliade, Oswald Spengler and Arnold J. Toynbee, believe that the religious phenomenon follows a cyclic pattern that includes the rise-decline binomial. The Christian church during Tertullian's time is eminently a religious phenomenon, therefore, in this article, we will value and prove the conjecture that the Christian church from the end of the 2nd century, the beginning of the 3rd century, enrolls itself in the ascension-decline pattern. The objective is to highlight the fact that Tertullian's writings put in the foreground data that attest to the rise of the Christian church in which the theologian participates, but also its temporary decline. At the same time, we will finally explore, briefly, correspondences between the church of Tertullian's time and the dynamics of the contemporary Christian church as reflected in some contemporary records in the academic literature.

KEYWORDS: ascension, relevance, church, montanist, Tertullian

Mircea Eliade, in the work titled "The Myth of the Eternal Return,"² notes that the earliest civilizations revolved around the idea of the cyclicity of history, *illud tempus*. For example, the Mazdean text, preserved

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² Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, translated by Willard R. Trask, Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, Electronic Edition, 2005

in the Denkart, IX, 8, Zoroastrian, Medo-Persian literature, notes the myth of the four cosmic ages: gold, silver, steel and “mixed with iron.”³ This last stage, that of mixing with iron, is the stage of cosmic judgment, which they will survive, enjoying eternity and beatitude, “only those who are not guilty.”⁴ Eliade highlights three types of binary cyclicity of the chaos-order or decline-ascension type: one cosmic according to which history will end with the damnation of sinners, another agrarian, where we have “traditional doctrine of periodic regeneration of the world through annual repetition of the Creation”⁵ and another individual one, which, according to the evangelical tradition, takes place on a personal level through *metanoia*. The last one “translates the periodic regeneration of the world into a regeneration of the human individual.”⁶

Oswald Spengler wonders, too, if there is a logic of history, “a metaphysical structure of historic humanity, something that is independent of the outward forms.”⁷ He believes that

“It is, and has always been, a matter of knowledge that the expression-forms of world-history are limited in number, and that eras, epochs, situations, persons are ever repeating themselves true to type.”⁸ He resorts to an analogy of the succession of seasons to evoke the historical cycle. Thus, each historical cycle begins with the spring season, characterized by “great creations of the newly-awakened dream-heavy soul”, continues with the summer one, marked by the „ripening consciousness”, passes through the autumn one, in which the evolutionary climax is reached, namely the “zenith of strict intellectual creativeness” and the end of this spiral corresponds to the winter season, a stage characterized by the: “Extinction of the spiritual creative force. Life itself becomes problem-

3 Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 123.

4 Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 124.

5 Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 126.

6 Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 127.

7 Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West; Form and Actuality*, translated by Charles Francis Atkinson, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926, p. 3.

8 Spengler, *The Decline*, p. 4.

atical. Ethical-practical tendencies of an irreligious and unmetaphysical cosmopolitanism.”⁹

Arnold J. Toynbee denies Spengler’s image, according to which “societies are organisms”¹⁰, but he also observes that civilizations follow a pattern that includes the following stages: “geneses, growths, breakdowns, and disintegrations ...”¹¹ Toynbee also noted historical evidence, “salient features”, which attests to the fact that civilizations follow a lifecycle and that they do not collapse irremediably, but extend their lives through the values they transfer to new civilizations that later assimilate them based on appropriation relationships. He calls this type of relationship “apparentation-and-affiliation.”¹² Universal states, for example, appear in the first phase in close connection with the previous ones, “they arise after, and not before, the breakdowns of the civilisations.”¹³ The next stage is the one in which they are established and self-supporting: “This negativeness is the hallmark of their authorship and also the essential condition of their establishment and maintenance.”¹⁴ The third stage is the one marked by the accelerated advance towards disintegration, “a process of disintegration that works itself out in successive pulsations of lapse-and-rally followed by relapse.”¹⁵ The fourth stage is the tragic one, “A Time of Troubles that had been previously been gathering momentum from successive failures of the repeted attempts to stem it.”¹⁶ Essentially, universal states are not marked, in their evolution, by an end, they are in fact “a means to some end that is outside and be-

⁹Spengler, *The Decline*, Table I.

¹⁰Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Abridgement of volumes VII-X by D. C. Somervell, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Electronic Edition, 1985, p. 420.

¹¹ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, p. 12.

¹²Toynbee, *A Study of History*, p. 12.

¹³ Toynbee, *A Study of History*, p. 13

¹⁴Toynbee, *A Study of History*, p. 13.

¹⁵Toynbee, *A Study of History*, p. 13.

¹⁶Toynbee, *A Study of History*, p. 14.

yond them.”¹⁷ Given the fact that civilizations do not repeat themselves, according to Toynbee, being born again from their own ashes, like the Phoenix bird, but succeed each other by adopting some values of those that preceded them, the historical cycle is more like a spiral in which civilizations coincide, but on other levels of historical and axiological existence.

Although Eliade, Spengler and Toynbee agree vis-à-vis a certain cyclicity of life and history (although Toynbee believes that the theory of the cyclicity of history, as found in Plato’s *Timaeus*, for example, has no evidence to support it, and even more evidence to disprove it¹⁸), yet their analogies differ considerably. However, what these three scholars have in common is the recognition that each cycle is constituted, broadly speaking, by the ascension-decline binomial. Historians have in fact unanimously noted that all great civilizations succumb acutely through decline and fall.¹⁹

In the following pages we will analyse two cycles, one of the church and the other one related to Tertullian’s biography. In Tertullian’s work it can be seen that the church of his epoch goes through the cycle of hope, enthusiasm, stagnation, discouragement, demobilization, capitulation, fear, fraternization, disempowerment and hope again. At the same time, the cycle of Tertullian’s life and faith begins with belonging to the united Christian church, follows the abandonment of the church, but ends with his group, the Tertullianists, returning to the church, performing a cycle, sinusoidal spiral.

Carthage-born, Tertullian (c. 155–c. 240 AD), originally a pagan, became one of the most prolific Christian apologists. In his vast work, a theological and apologetic treasury that has survived over the centuries, a paradigm shift in terms of rhetoric and content is noticeable. At the beginning, Tertullian evokes in magnanimous phrases the eminence of the church and Christian theology, but later, following his conversion from

¹⁷Toynbee, *A Study of History*, p. 14.

¹⁸Toynbee, *A Study of History*, p. 1420

¹⁹ Moore, R. W. “Decline and Fall.” *Greece & Rome* 5, no. 14 (1936): 65–72.

the institutionalized church which he considered too lax in terms of religious practice and moral conduct, the theologian adopts the austere practice of Montanism, period in which he assumes the obligation to sharply and constantly criticize its excesses and moral deviations. He ends up giving rise to his own Christian group, a group animated by a purist and soldierly conservatism, which came to be called the „Tertullianists”, and which lasted until the 5th century.²⁰ Henry Wace, following Bp. Kayne and Bonwetsch, notes this „change of course” in the rhetorical discourse of the Carthaginian theologian, emphasizing the existence of two theological stages in which one can distinguish the works written while he was still in the united church, as well as those elaborated during the time when he adopted Montanism.²¹

Wace, therefore, lists Tertullian’s works written while in the universal church, together with their approximate dates:

(1) Works written while still in the church: (a) Apologetic writings (c. 197–198): ad Martyres; Apologeticum; de Testimonio Animae; ad Nationes, i. ii; adv. Judaeos. (b) Other works of this period, but of less certain date: de Oratione; de Baptismo; de Poenitentia; de Spectaculis; de Cultu Feminarum, i.; de Idololatria; de Cultu Feminarum, ii.; de Patientia; ad Uxorem, i. ii. (the last five c. 197–199); de Praescriptione Haereticorum (c. 199); adv. Marcionem i. (1st ed.), c. 200.²²

The writings of the theologian during his adoption of Montanism, as distinguished by Wace, appear as it follows:

(2) Montanistic writings: — (a) Defending the church and her teachings (c. 202–203): de Corona; de Fuga in Persecutione; de Exhortatione Castitatis. (b) Defending the Paraclete and His discipline: de Virginibus Velandis (c. 203–204, a transition work); adv. Marcion. (2nd ed.; c. 206); ib. (3rd ed.; c. 207). Between 200–207 or later: adv. Hermogenem; adv. Valentinianos; adv. Marcion. (iv.); de

20Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, Hastings, East Sussex, United Kingdom: Delphi Publishing Ltd, Electronic Edition, 2018, p. 3088–3089.

21Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 3106.

22Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 3093.

Carne Christi; de Resurrectione Carnis; adv. Marcion. (v.). De Pallio and de Anima (c. 208–209); Scorpiace (c. 212; al. 203 or 204); ad Scapulam (c. 212). Three c. 217, al. 203–207: de Monogamia; de Jejunio; de Pudicitia; and adv. Praxean (c. 223, al. c. 208–209).²³

In the following we will analyze the work of Tertullian from the point of view of the ascension-decline binomial, in order to be able to notice its existence in the image that the theologian had of the church, but also the intermediate stages of the ascension, on the one hand and those of decline, on the other hand.

I. The Secondary Ascension of the Church

In Tertullian's early work there are signs of the rise of the Christian church. The ascent is notable for two stages. Primary ascension, i.e. the first segment of the ascension, defined by fraternization and unburdening and secondary ascension, i.e. the second part of the ascension, individualized by hope and enthusiasm. Hope is the feeling that prevails in that stage of the ascent of the church in which the church looks with confidence to its future, and the period characterized by enthusiasm is that stage of the church in which the believers feel that they are able, that there are enough signs to mobilize themselves in major missionary and evangelistic activities. Both hope and enthusiasm are mass feelings of congregations where they are constantly and deeply nourished by faith. The primary ascension follows chronologically the decline, and the secondary ascension follows immediately after the primary advance of the church.

In this section we will begin with the presentation of the secondary ascension, as it appears from the work of the apologist.

The rise of the church marks two successive stages, hope and enthusiasm, but these are closely followed by stagnation.

In the work „Ad Martyres”, the Carthaginian theologian names the church using an illustrious package of maternal terms, among which:

²³Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 3093.

“our lady mother the Church.”²⁴ The respect and praise expressed by these terms are undoubtedly pronounced and charged with deep admiration. Tertullian reiterates the church-mother analogy in „De Monogamia”, a late work, when he states about a certain Christian who “has the church as his mother.”²⁵

a. Hope

Another work, consisting of forty chapters, „Apologeticus Pro Christianis”, in the 5th chapter, Tertullian refers to the fact that the information that Tiberius reaches through the intelligence services, proves the truth about the divinity of Christ, a fact that directly leads to his favoring of Christianity: “Tiberius accordingly, in whose days the Christian name - made its entry into the world, having himself received intelligence from Palestine of events which had clearly shown the truth of Christ’s divinity, brought the matter before the senate, with his own decision in favour of Christ.”²⁶ To point out that during the time of Tiberius Christianity had become quite known to the general public is essentially a sign of joy and hope which the Christian theologian retains in writing with undisguised satisfaction. Also, Tertullian’s reference to Marcus Aurelius is noteworthy, the distinguished emperor and Stoic philosopher who “bears his testimony that that Germanic drought was removed by the rains obtained through the prayers of the Christians who chanced to be fighting under him.”²⁷ Another indication of Tertullian’s joy for the public stature of the church and his hope for its progress is given by its unquestionable moral profile. The theologian notes the high standard of its morality, no doubt observed by the young leader Pliny, who confesses to the emperor Trajan, saying that “except an obstinate disinclination to offer sacrifices, he found in the religious services nothing but meetings at early morning for singing hymns to Christ and God, and sealing

²⁴Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 133.

²⁵Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1705.

²⁶Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 302.

²⁷Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 303.

home their way of life by a united pledge to be faithful to their religion, forbidding murder, adultery, dishonesty, and other crimes.”²⁸ Punishing Christians when they demonstrate exemplary morality is inconsistent with justice and cannot be overlooked, the theologian believes. The Church, although it was under the fire of persecutions, here and there, had the profile of an admirable human-divine institution, a fact for which Tertullian outlines a vision on which he then molds his development as a theologian and apologist of the church. Here, at this stage, Tertullian engages, like no other before him, in the noble action of defending the church and its apostolic faith through writing and speeches. The hope that the church inspired opened great horizons and projected dreams.

Tertullian also accuses the accident of incest caused by adulterous and passing relationships that give birth to children who, not knowing their origin, can marry their family members, repeating the drama known in modern times as the myth of Oedipus. The theologian asserts that such unfortunate accidents are avoided by Christians through strict morality and uncompromising chastity that help them avoid adultery and post-marital infidelity.²⁹

Tertullian praises the divine grace given to Christians that distinguishes them from their fellow Greeks and the elites of Hellenic culture and philosophy:

Diogenes the fires of lust, and how a certain Speusippus, of Plato's school, perished in the adulterous act. The Christian husband has nothing to do with any but his own wife. Democritus, in putting out his eyes, because he could not look on women without lusting after them, and was pained if his passion was not satisfied, owns plainly, by the punishment he inflicts, his incontinence. But a Christian with grace-healed eyes is sightless in this matter; he is mentally blind against the assaults of passion.³⁰

²⁸Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 294.

²⁹Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 313.

³⁰Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 382.

b Enthusiasm

In the same work, in the same vein, in its first chapter, Tertullian notes the numerical progress of Christianity, highlighting the fact that its correct understanding makes it convincing, necessary and agreeable, and conversions are not expected even among those who initially had hated the faith simply out of ignorance:

From being its haters they become its disciples. By simply getting acquainted with it, they begin now to hate what they had formerly been, and to profess what they had formerly hated; and their numbers are as great as are laid to our charge. The outcry is that the State is filled with Christians — that they are in the fields, in the citadels, in the islands: they make lamentation, as for some calamity, that both sexes, every age and condition, even high rank, are passing over to the profession of the Christian faith;³¹

According to the data provided by the source used here, „The Completed Works of Tertullian”, in the 2nd century AD, there were 2,000,000 Christians in the Roman Empire.³² If we rely on the information that in this century there were 70,000,000 citizens in the empire, then Christians were in the percentage of 2.86%. A not inconsiderable percentage, especially for the fact that the increase of their number had had a fulminant starting from the first century. Therefore, Tertullian could rightly be animated with hope and confidence about the future of Christianity in the world. Chantal Delsol renders one of Tertullian's enthusiastic invitations addressed to his confreres as follows: “It is proper to fight against all prejudices, against institutions, against ancestors and inherited power, against laws given by rulers and advice given by wise men; against Antiquity, custom and necessity; against the parables, charms, and wonders which strengthened the adulterous deities.”³³ We have here an eloquent example

31Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 291.

32Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1668.

33apud Chantal Delsol, *Sfârșitul Creștinătății, Inversiunea Normativă și Noul Timp*, București: Spandugino, Editia a II-a, 2023, p. 46.

of missionary enthusiasm. From the wealth of his writings, Tertullian was not slow to wage the battle himself to which he called the believers.

Along with the gratifying fact of the multiplication of the number of churches, and implicitly the number of their members, Tertullian highlights with delight the theological unity of all the churches which, in spirit, are one church, stable and hospitable:

Therefore the churches, although they are so many and so great, comprise but the one primitive church, (founded) by the apostles, from which they all (spring). In this way all are primitive, and all are apostolic, whilst they are all proved to be one, in (unbroken) unity, by their peaceful communion, and title of brotherhood, and bond of hospitality, — privileges which no other rule directs than the one tradition of the selfsame mystery.³⁴

It should also be stated here that in the last chapter of „Apologeticus Pro Christianis”, Tertullian gives hope for the survival and advancement of Christians, despite the repeated persecutions ordered by some of the Roman emperors, through his famous statement: “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; *the blood of Christians is seed*.”³⁵ Repeatedly, Tertullian notes that persecutions do not curtail the momentum of the church or extinguish the flame of its faith, on the contrary, they increase it even more and feed the flame of faith with even greater power.

In another work, quite famous, in defense of the church, „De Praescriptione Haereticorum”, written during the time when the Carthaginian theologian belonged, body and soul, to the universal church, his fiery enthusiasm, fueled abundantly by the spiritual oil of the church, is noted. He rejects any mixture of secular philosophy and Christianity, from the deep conviction that Christianity can survive by faith alone, without relying on the foreign aid of philosophy or culture.

³⁴Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 251.

³⁵Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 394.

The sufficiency of Christ and the Gospel fully engages the enthusiastic faith of the theologian: “there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.”³⁶ Here are his words:

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? what between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from “the porch of Solomon,” who had himself taught that “the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.” Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel!³⁷

The faith in Christ is sufficient on its own. Tertullian believes at this stage of his famous theological mission of defending the church and apostolic faith.

c. Stagnation

Both the temporary stage of hope and the one characterized by missionary enthusiasm are marked in Tertullian’s work by the feeling of discomfiture generated by evidences of the fact that the church seems to be laying down its arms, tolerating moral decline and sliding down the slope of degeneration. The Church substitutes the love of fasting and moral purity with the love of eating and the love of impurity. This perception is affirmed in the work „De Jejuniis, Adversus Psychicos” (On Fasting, Against the Materialists). The theologian packages these habits under the term “*animal* faith”. Here are his words: “through love of eating, love of impurity finds passage. I recognise, therefore, *animal* faith by its care of the flesh (of which it wholly consists).”³⁸ With these words, Tertullian accuses the stagnation of the church in matters of faith and religious life, and notices its inappropriate reaction to spiritual discipline: “so that it deservedly accuses the spiritual discipline, which according to

36Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 236.

37Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 235.

38Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1709.

its ability opposes it, in this species of continence as well.”³⁹ These ideas place Tertullian, without a trace of doubt, already in the camp of the Montanists, whose exponents are Montanus, Priscilla and Maximilla.⁴⁰ Here we notice the change in the feelings that Tertullian had for the mother church. Somewhere before the threshold of the transition from the united church to the sect of the Montanists, Tertullian had to face the realities of a church whose moral momentum is lost along the way. The fact that the church is no longer regarded as „mother”, but is represented by the notion of „animal faith” is an indication of the fact that somewhere the church had lost what it had most precious in terms of morality and sanctification.

II. The Decline of the Church

Tertullian's abdication from the loose living of the Christian church, which he had so long served, immediately after his conversion from paganism to Christianity, and his withdrawal from its ranks, are facts as surprising as they are disturbing. In this section we will analyze Tertullian's perception of the insurmountable shortcomings of the church that marked its decline, in the eyes of the Carthaginian theologian, and which, at the same time, generated the radical decisions of Tertullian's alienation from it.

a. Discouragement

Tertullian begins by placing himself firmly in the Montanist camp. His first work with this theme is „De Corona”, written sometime between 202-203 AD, where Tertullian praises the strong character of a soldier who, during a military ceremony, stood out, at his disadvantage, by the fact that he refused to put the laurel wreath on his head as his comrades in arms had done. When asked about the reason for his refusal, he justified himself by highlighting his Christian faith, for which he was required to account before the superior military tribunal for disobedience

³⁹Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1709.

⁴⁰Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1709.

and non-compliance.⁴¹ This courageous gesture of the Christian soldier who disavowed his own coronation, considering it an act detrimental to the glorification of Christ, is contrasted by Tertullian with the lack of courage of Christians who admit their crowning with laurel wreaths, not recognizing the sinful nature of such a gesture.⁴² The act of crowning with laurel is considered by Tertullian as an attempt „to vindicate the sin” and associates it with the lack of courage that unfortunately characterizes even the pastors of Christian communities continually threatened by persecution and martyrdom, a context in which their flight from martyrdom prevails before the courage to die for Christ: “Nor do I doubt that some are already turning their back on the Scriptures, are making ready their luggage, are equipped for flight from city to city; for that is all of the gospel they care to remember. I know, too, their pastors are lions in peace, deer in the fight.”⁴³ Courage is becoming a *rara avis*, and discouragement is so prevalent in the Christian community that many fall easy prey to this phenomenon.

b. Demobilization

Closely related to deterrence is demobilization. In „De Fuga in Persecutione”, another Montanist work, written in the same period, 202-203, AD, the Christian apologist laments the fear threaded tightly into the hearts of the Christian leaders and the abandonment by them of the churches during the persecution. Not only do Christian leaders lack the courage to face shame and persecution, but they are surprised by the theologian, himself a priest, to abandon the flock in order to escape reproach and suffering, leaving the pastoral ministry effectively abandoned.

And this never happens more than when in persecution the Church is abandoned by the clergy. If any one recognises the Spirit also, he will hear him branding the runaways. But if it does not become the keepers of the flock to flee when

41 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1562.

42 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1562.

43 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1562.

the wolves invade it — nay, if that is absolutely unlawful (for He who has declared a shepherd of this sort a bad one has certainly condemned him; and whatever is condemned has, without doubt, become unlawful) — on this ground it will not be the duty of those who have been set over the Church to flee in the time of persecution.⁴⁴

Fleeing from persecution is an act of cowardice as long as the Christian is Christ-clothed. This deed is exposed as vile because, says the theologian, “Christ, who is in you, is treated as of small account when you give yourself back to devil”⁴⁵

c. Surrender

Another stage in the decline of the church is that in which Tertullian denounces the capitulation by renunciation of Scriptural values by the Christian church, now on a vertiginous slide down the slope of the decline. Among the values that the recognized church abandons are the value of monogamy, of artistic purity (the production of idols by Christian artisans), the spiritual value of detachment from tainted social spheres such as the theaters, the value of frugal, minimalist living (fasting and prayer) and the value of sexual abstinence and marital fidelity. In this section we will introduce each briefly.

Thus, Tertullian’s work in which the value of monogamy is noted, and its abandonment by the Christian church, so appreciated and admired by the theologian at first, is accused, is „De Monogamia” (c. 223, al. c. 208-209). He begins by accusing Christians of knowingly entering the sorry slope of decline, calling them „psychics.” They are not influenced by the Holy Spirit, but on the contrary, they are animated by the carnal. Here are the words of the apologist:

But to the Psychics, since they receive not the Spirit, the things which are the Spirit’s are not pleasing. Thus, so long as the things which are the Spirit’s please

44 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1659.

45 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1657

them not, the things which are of the flesh will please, as being the contraries of the Spirit.⁴⁶

They are so depraved and complacent with the sin of polygamy that compared to the heretics they are placed, from the moral point of view, much more precariously: “Heretics do away with marriages; Psychics accumulate them. The former marry not even once; the latter not only once.”⁴⁷ Unlike both heretics and „psychics”, i.e. apostate Christians, the congregation adopted by Tertullian believes and lives differently: “We admit one marriage, just as we do one God.”⁴⁸ In the same writing, the theologian refers to the apostolic prescription in 1 Timothy 3, in which it is claimed from the bishops to be the men of one wife. He considers that this command given with apostolic authority concerns all Christians, not only bishops:

Be consistent in prescribing, that what is enjoined upon certain (individuals) is not enjoined upon all; or else, if the other (characteristics) indeed are common, but monogamy is imposed upon bishops alone, (tell me), pray, whether they alone are to be pronounced *Christians* upon whom is conferred the entirety of discipline.⁴⁹

Another value abandoned by the Christian church is that of artistic purity. This practice is in the proximity of the temptations of idolatry. Tertullian condemns idol-making activities in „On the Idols,” a work probably written in 197-199 BC. He bases himself axiomatically on the sacraments, from which he concludes that “that arts of that kind are opposed to the faith.”⁵⁰ Since the worship of idols is part of the demonic toolkit, then their artisanal production is an activity of the same nature: “For how we

46 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1671.

47 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1670.

48 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1671.

49 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1698.

50 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 604.

have renounced the devil and his angels, if we make them?”⁵¹ Artistic creation is correlated with Christian conviction, and if the duplicity of the confession of faith in Christ is adopted, we inevitably transpose a contradiction: “Can you have denied with the tongue what with the hand you confess? . . . preach one God, you make so many?”⁵² The artistic act of creating an idol is associated by Tertullian with the pagan sacrifice: “to them you make your sweat a libation; to them you kindle the torch of your forethought. More are you to them than a priest, since it is by your means they have a priest; your diligence is their divinity.”⁵³

The value of living in holiness is defended with determination by the Carthaginian theologian. Tertullian expressly refers to the fact that the apostate church which gives in the impulse to participate in the theaters tarnished by the secular age and the whirlwind of demons. He addresses this issue in „De Spectaculis”, a work written probably by the end of the 2nd century. The theologian emphasizes the neutral nature of the theater, but highlights the decadent character of its sinful content: “The places in themselves do not contaminate, but what is done in them; from this even the places themselves, we maintain, become defiled. The polluted things pollute us.”⁵⁴ Along with the acceptance of astrological practices and the selling of incense, attending theatrical performances can affect a Christian spiritually. In support of this theological perspective, the Christian apologist evokes a case of a Christian woman “who went to the theatre, and came back possessed.”⁵⁵ When questioned about the audacity to possess a Christian woman, the devil allegedly replied: “«And in truth I did it most righteously, for I found her in my domain».”⁵⁶ Given the manifestation of demons in the secular and pagan artistic space, the Christian’s participation

51 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 604.

52 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 604.

53 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 605.

54 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 570.

55 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 591.

56 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 591.

falls into the catalogue of duplicity: “How many other undoubted proofs we have had in the case of persons who, by keeping company with the devil in the shows, have fallen from the Lord!”⁵⁷

The minimalist lifestyle, characterized by modesty and decency, by a frugal diet, trained by fasting and prayer, a life detached from the temptations of luxury consumption and expensive accessories is another moral and spiritual value that Tertullian cares about. The opposite of this living, an indulgent life addicted to opulence and luxury is, for Tertullian, a symptom of spiritual decay. In the writing „De Cultu Feminarum”, the theologian incriminates the dyeing of female hair with saffron and encourages modesty and dependence on heaven and the love of God.⁵⁸ A series of metaphors clothe his argument in favor of modest and minimalist living fully satisfied with God’s love:

Do you go forth (to meet them) already arrayed in the cosmetics and ornaments of prophets and apostles; drawing your whiteness from simplicity, your ruddy hue from modesty; painting your eyes with bashfulness, and your mouth with silence; implanting in your ears the words of God; fitting on your necks the yoke of Christ. Submit your head to your husbands, and you will be enough adorned. Busy your hands with spinning; keep your feet at home; and you will “please” better than (by arraying yourselves) in gold. Clothe yourselves with the silk of uprightness, the fine linen of holiness, the purple of modesty. Thus painted, you will have God as your Lover!⁵⁹

Precisely to prove the importance of preserving values such as modesty, decency and Christian minimalist living, Tertullian notes in the writing entitled „De Jejuniis, Adversus Psychichos”, written in his Montanist period, the unnaturalness of the situation in which Christians turned the prison cell into a food pantry for martyrs like Pristinus who, says Tertullian, was not accustomed to abstinence.⁶⁰ As well as living in modesty, Tertullian

57 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 591.

58 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 632.

59 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 644.

60 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1731

also promotes living in sexual purity and accuses the church of a lax attitude towards sexual sins that must not find their place in the sacred framework of church members, neither adultery nor “other frenzies of passions — impious both toward the bodies and toward the sexes — beyond the laws of nature, we banish not only from the threshold, but from all shelter of the Church, because they are not sins, but monstrosities.”⁶¹ Tertullian’s attitude is undisguised and intolerant of the edict of the bishop of bishops (probably Pope Callistus⁶²), when he issues a liberal edict addressed to adultery and fornication: “O edict, on which cannot be inscribed, Good deed! And where shall this liberality be posted up?”⁶³ Again, one can see the church’s tacit capitulation of the conservative values, a situation Tertullian deplores and sanctions by leaving the church.

III. The primary rise of the church

The capitulation of the church, through its renunciation of ethical and spiritual values, causes the theologian to adopt Montanism. After renouncing the mother church Tertullian becomes more prolific writing more than during the time he served the united Christian church.

a. Fear and the feeling that enough is enough

During this period, the son of the united church criticizes his apostate mother, a dramatic moment for the history of the church, a moment of unique diagnosis of a spiritual pathology which becomes part of the cycle of historical maturation of Christianity. The vigor and firmness with which Tertullian criticizes the excesses of the church of his time denotes the seriousness of its decline, of course, in the theologian’s perception, but also the feeling of overflow that he experiences and the feeling that more cannot be done, that enough is enough, as well as the feeling that if he does not do something, both his life and those who feel like him will irreversibly collapse into disaster, and with them the testimony of

61 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1751.

62 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 3070.

63 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1743.

non-duplicitous and apostolic Christianity. The mother lost her testimony and the son leaves home. The fear for the future of the faith prompts him to resort to self-withdrawal from the house of the mother church, which has become morally unhealthy and dangerous over time. What's next? Will Tertullian survive?

d. Fraternization

Existential suffering sharpens the need for fraternization. Tertullian accepts Montanism specifically because he needs to group himself with Christians who share the rigorous conservatism promoted by the apostles. He does not adopt charismatic extremism, which is why, for example, he disputes the sayings of the Catæschinetans that "Paraclete has spoken in Montanus more things than Christ."⁶⁴ Tertullian could not admit the equating of Christ's words with the words of any mortal. For him, Christ and the teaching of the apostles, based on His personality and teaching, constituted the supreme authority in matters of faith and living. Another proof that Tertullian did not fraternize uncritically with the Montanists is the fact that at some point he left them forming his own group known in time as the *Tertullianists*, who over the centuries fraternized with the church led by St. Augustine finding himself fully in its practice and theology. Henry Palmer Chapman points out these things: "After writing more virulently against the Church than even against heathen and persecutors, he separated from the Montanists and founded a sect of his own. The remnant of the Tertullianists was reconciled to the Church by St. Augustine."⁶⁵

a. Unburdening

The group of Tertullianists lasted for many decades (until the 5th century⁶⁶), because where there is fraternization, there is resilience. The withdrawal

⁶⁴ Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 1824.

⁶⁵ Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 3070.

⁶⁶ Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 3089.

of the apologist from the bosom of the united church was not an individualistic or hermit gesture, but a purist, radicalist, critical, conservative and militant one. Tertullian did not wage his prolific campaign for apostolicity and moral rigor alone. What at one time meant to him the Montanists, later represented the Tertullian group, but together with those who professed the same religious faith and practice, aspirations and moral integrity, he unburdened himself of fears and helped others to do the same, and at the same time he was able to carry on his prolific struggle into deep old age,⁶⁷ both against the aberrations of the heretics, and against the laxity of the united church. Unburdening closes the cycle of hope, because the release it brings silently germinates hope for better and further victories.

Conclusion

The church, in the perception of the Carthaginian theologian, is initially characterized by hope and vision, which justifies his entry into the service of the church. As Wace notes, Tertullian was educated in philosophy, history, science, he spoke and wrote Latin and Greek, he was an expert in Roman law, and could hold a position as a high Roman official.⁶⁸ At least as his academic and professional training profiled him as an excellent candidate for secular positions, Tertullian chooses to be ordained as a priest of the church practicing his ministry, most likely in Carthage.⁶⁹ It can also be noted in Tertullian's writings that after this stage, the phase of enthusiasm is also emerging, marked by real apologetic aspirations. These two stages can be considered intertwined, but one can dissociate in Tertullian's writings both the hope for the future of the church, since if Tertullian had not had it he would not have attached himself to the church ministry, and the enthusiasm, because, as one could see, the image of Christianity is an admirable one, which leads him to present it as such through writing and rhetoric so that even the opponents of this

67 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 3070.

68 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 3088.

69 Delphi Classics, *The Completed Works of Tertullian*, p. 3088.

movement recognize its undeniable merits. Tertullian's enthusiasm also emerges from the apologetic commitment to which he follows, eloquently and successfully defending the Christian church of the second and third centuries, before heretics and even its persecutors.

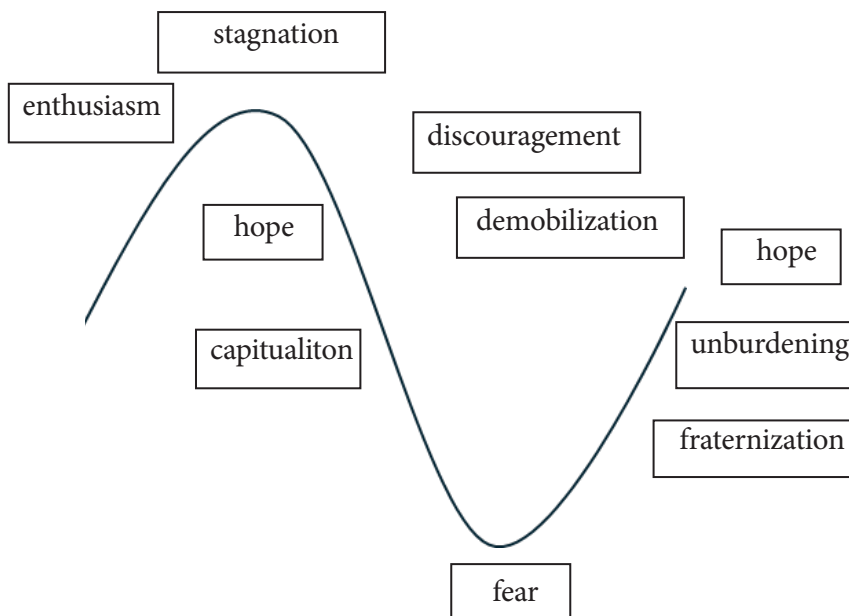
If the moral decadence of the mother church had been a short-lived impasse, a solvable accident, a passing and treatable pathology, Tertullian would not have gone through the trauma of withdrawing from it, especially since the esteem he held for her was a special one. The problem was her freezing in decadence, her insurmountable paralysis, her block in the process of sanctification, her stagnation. This is followed by discouragement. Assumed courage is rare, and most Christians are driven by discouragement. Tertullian here denounces unnatural spiritual phenomena in the eyes of a true Christian, a follower of the apostles and of Jesus Christ. Discouragement is followed by the demobilization of Christian leaders who do not find in the treasury of their impoverished spiritual life reasons to continue the course of their faith. The capitulation or progressive renunciation of the mother church to the founding moral and spiritual values is the penultimate stage followed by the fear that brings the sufferer closer to the brothers in whom he can trust, to the minority but conservative congregation that shares the same values and high spiritual aspirations. Christianity had *ab initio* the vocation of the minority, and Tertullian finds himself perfectly in the conservative and fighting minority. Fraternization paves the way for a new cycle in church dynamics, because suffering unites. But what is remarkable about Tertullian's biography is that unity unburdens. He writes much more once he entered sectarian but conservative Christian group than he used to when he belonged to united Christianity. According to Wace's list, Tertullian wrote only three years in his united period and twenty years in his sectarian period! So fraternization relieves the burden. What must be observed, now, is that, according to the theory of the cyclicity of the religious phenomenon, disburdening closes the cycle preceding hope, from where the cycle repeats itself, of course in another time and other terms, but the

Tertullians find themselves integrated, by St. Augustine, in the 5th century, in the united church.

Therefore, we have a cycle consisting of: hope, excitement, stagnation, discouragement, demobilization, capitulation, fear, fraternization, relief and hope again, and so on. Thus, the conjecture is confirmed and this cycle can be represented in the scheme of Figure 1.

Figure 1.

The rise-decline-rise cycle passed through hope, enthusiasm, stagnation, discouragement, demobilization, fear, fraternization or solidarity,



unburdening and, again, hope, is noted by some books of recent years, but without these stages being invoked.

For example, Stephanie Spellers recognizes the decline of the contemporary church, and identifies some of the causes: self-centrism, White supremacy, misogyny, environmental exploitation, consumerism, oppression, domination and racism.⁷⁰ But after the author highlights the decline of the recent American Protestant Christian church and points out that “entire generations are rejecting faith”⁷¹, he expresses, however, the hope that after this stage of decline will be consummated there will follow one of a new ascent of the church: “God took the broken body of God’s own son and raised him to new life. God can take these unraveled threads and ragged patches of fabric and knit them into a new tapestry. God can take the cracked pieces of the church, the body of Christ, and fashion a new church with God’s purposes at its heart. It will not be the same life or the same body, but a resurrection body that bears the marks of the old and the new.”⁷²

David Carlin notes, instead, the decline of the Catholic church in America, started in 1960, affirming three causes that are responsible for this tragedy: Vatican II, responsible for the dilution of the faith, the end of the Catholic quasi-ghetto, with its sterile self-isolationism, and the hegemony of secularism and moral liberalism, which fractured the Christian ethical and epistemological discernment of the younger generations.⁷³ In relation to the fracturing of ethical discernment, Paul L. Williams highlights the situation in which even the big ones give in. On July 29, 2013, Pope Francis was asked about the issue of homosexual priests. He replied

70 Stephanie Spellers, *The Church Cracked Open, Disruption, Decline, and New Hope for the Beloved Community*, New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, Electronic Edition, 2021, pp. 18-24.

71 Stephanie Spellers, *The Church Cracked Open*, p. 9.

72 Stephanie Spellers, *The Church Cracked Open*, p. 13.

73 David Carlin, *The Decline and Fall of the Catholic Church in America*, Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 2023, Electronic Edition, p. 281.

thus: “«If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?»”⁷⁴ Also, on January 27, 2015, when Pope “Francis met and hugged Diego Neria Lejarraga, a forty-eight-year-old transgender person called “the devil’s daughter” by his parish priest. Rather than castigating Neria for undergoing gender reassignment, the pope said, “God loves all his children, however they are; you are a son of God, who accepts you exactly as you are. Of course you are a son of the Church.”⁷⁵ Finally Williams comments: “It was a deliberate display of rejection by the presiding pontiff of the moral teaching of traditional Catholicism.”⁷⁶ The democratization of information and the progress of modern education, which introduced pluralistic and relativistic paradigms into the sacred hall of new generations, contributed significantly to the erosion of absolutist ethics, firm convictions and, implicitly, to the decrease in the number of those who attend the church, observes Raphaël Franck and Laurence R. Iannaccone. Here are their words:

Across four categories of government social spending—health, old-age, family, and education service - only growth in education spending consistently predicted religious decline. This one effect was, however, sufficiently strong to account for nearly all of the measured drop in 20th century attendance⁷⁷

Carlin ends his book on a note of chronic pessimism. However, his effort to imagine the eventuality of a church passed through the thick sieve of the three causes that successfully produced the precipitous decline, a new, purified church, is evident. What would a surviving church look like? This question seems more like an exercise in imagination than a hope for the author to base on certainties. First, Carlin believes that this church will not be a church, in the sense that it will not have population, but believers, and then, it will not be denominational, because denominations

74 Paul L. Williams, *Among the Ruins, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Catholic Church*, New York: Prometheus Books, 2017, Electronic Edition, pp. 258-259.

75 Williams, *Among the Ruins*, p. 259.

76 Williams, *Among the Ruins*, p. 259.

77 Idem *ibidem*

tend to consider themselves about as good and true as other religions, also, it will not be sectarian, in the sense that it will not become ghettoized, nor will it replicate any of the successful poses that the church had in the „good old days”, but, rather, this eventual church there would be a fifth option, this will be the result of a process of trial and error in which many Christians will be involved and will be consumed in many decades.⁷⁸

Another author, this one from the Parisian university, Chantal Delsol, announces the end of Christianity, in the book entitled „The End of Christianity, Normative Inversion, New Time” citing as causes the normative inversion, which opposes the secular ethic to the Christian one and replaces it with success, then the ontological inversion which is pronounced in favor of a polytheism of Asian origin to take the place of Judeo-Christian monotheism, and then the secularist nihilism which affirmed the death of God. In the end, Delsol believes that the church will resist by assuming the position of a primary church, detached from the springs of traditional institutional power, which, devoid of hegemonic ambitions, will adopt the vocation of a minority church emphasizing on some values of Christian substance such as „spiritual serenity, patience and perseverance” in the whole period of resilience and struggle for her own identity and existence.⁷⁹ So also in the substratum of her text is the hope of an ascension that will succeed the irreversible decline of the contemporary church.

In essence, Tertullian’s view of the united church of his time, still not tolerated by the Roman Empire, which would happen only a hundred years later, in AD 313, is that of a Christian institution entering the phase of decline, much different from the church of the years when his admiration for the same institution had been wholly. However, after this phase in the evolution of the church was overcome, the Christian church recog-

78 David Carlin, *The Decline and Fall of the Catholic Church in America*, Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 2023, Electronic Edition, p. 270-272.

79 Chantal Delsol, *Sfârșitul Creștinătății*, p. 118.

nized a certain ascent when, both the church of the Tertullianists and the united one, from the time of St. Augustine, converge and merge successfully. We also know that in history there have been periods of decline and ascent, for example the decline at the end of the medieval period, “the church in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries”⁸⁰ observed and diagnosed by Gordon Leff, which was followed in the west by the rise of Protestantism through Luther’s reformation and the counter-reformation. All these examples denote the fact that the church has a sinusoidal and cyclical chronological dynamic, that it is not without periods of decline, but, historically speaking, it is always alternated with ascent and progress.

We end this article on an optimistic note anticipating that the decline diagnosed by many contemporary authors will be succeeded in a few decades by a positive evolution of the church, although the socio-cultural circumstances determined by access to information and the development of general artificial intelligence technology are completely new and provocative.

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⁸⁰ Gordon Leff, “Heresy and the Decline of the Medieval Church.” *Past & Present*, no. 20 (1961): 36–51, p.36.

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