

Tertullian on the Relation of Philosophy and Heresy

Tertullian was noted for his hostility towards the intrusion of philosophy into theology. Philosophy, he argued, was pagan in its outlook, and its use in theology could only lead to heresy within the Church.

In his *De praescriptione haereticorum* ("On the Rule of the Heretic") (3rdC), Tertullian sets up a celebrated contrast between Athens and Jerusalem, symbolizing the tension between pagan philosophy and the revelation of the Christian faith.

Note that the reference to the "Academy" is not a general reference to the academic world, but specifically to the Platonic Academy at Athens. See also 1.1,1.2,1.

From McGrath (ed), *The Christian Theology Reader*, Blackwell, pg5 ,

Athens vs Jerusalem

For philosophy provides the material of worldly wisdom, in boldly asserting itself to be the interpreter of the divine nature and dispensation. The heresies themselves receive their weapons from philosophy. It was from this source that Valentinus, who was a disciple of Plato, got his ideas about the "aeons" and the "trinity of humanity". And it was from there that the god of Marcion (much to be preferred, on account of his tranquility) came; Marcion came from the Stoics. To say that the soul is subject to death is to go the way of Epicurus. And the denial of the resurrection of the body is found throughout the writings of all the philosophers. To say that matter is equal with God is to follow the doctrine of Zeno; to speak of a god of fire is to draw on Heraclitus. It is the same subjects which preoccupy both the heretics and the philosophers. Where does evil come from, and why? Where does human nature come from, and how?

What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem? between the Academy and the church? Our system of beliefs (*institutio*) comes from the Porch of Solomon, who himself taught that it was necessary to seek God in the simplicity of the heart. So much the worse for those who talk of a "stoic", "platonian", or "dialectic" Christianity! We have no need for curiosity after Jesus Christ, nor for inquiry (*inquisitio*) after the gospel. When we believe, we desire to believe nothing further. For we need believe nothing more than "there is nothing else which we are obliged to believe."

Augustine on Philosophy and Theology

In this writing, originally written in Latin around 397, Augustine deals with the relation between Christianity and pagan philosophy. Using the exodus from Egypt as a model, Augustine argues that there is no reason why Christians should not extract all that is good in philosophy, and put it to the service of preaching the gospel. Just as Israel left behind the burdens of Egypt, while carrying off its treasures, so theology can discard what is useless in philosophy, and exploit what is good and useful. See also 1.1; 1.2; 1.3.

From McGrath, *Christian Theology Reader*, Blackwell, 1995, pg 6

Spoiling the Egyptians

If those who are called philosophers, particularly the Platonists, have said anything which is true and consistent with our faith, we must not reject it, but claim it for our own use, in the knowledge that they possess it unlawfully. The Egyptians possessed idols and heavy burdens, which the children of Israel hated and from which they fled; however, they also possessed vessels of gold and silver and clothes which our forebears, in leaving Egypt, took for themselves in secret, intending to use them in a better manner (Exodus 3:21-2; 12:35-6)... In the same way, pagan learning is not entirely made up of false teachings and superstitions ... It contains also some excellent teachings, well suited to be used by truth, and excellent moral values. Indeed, some truths are even found among them which relate to the worship of the one God. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and their silver, which they did not invent themselves, but which they dug out of the mines of the providence of God, which are scattered throughout the world, yet which are improperly and unlawfully prostituted to the worship of demons. The Christian, therefore, can separate these truths from their unfortunate associations, take them away, and put them to their proper use for the proclamation of the gospel.

What else have many good and faithful people from amongst us done? Look at the wealth of gold and silver and clothes which Cyprian – that eloquent teacher and blessed martyr - brought with him when he left Egypt! And think of all that Lactantius brought with him, not to mention Marius Victorinus, Optatus, and Hilary of Poitiers, and others who are still living! And look at how much the Greeks have borrowed! And before all of these, we find that Moses, that most faithful servant of God, had done the same thing: after all, it is written of him that "he was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22).

Irenaeus on the Role of Tradition

In his writing "Against all Heresies," originally written in Greek towards the end of the second century, but now known mainly through a Latin translation, Irenaeus insisted that the living Christian community possessed a tradition of interpreting Scripture which was denied to heretics. By their historical succession from the apostles, the bishops ensure that their congregations remain faithful to their teachings and interpretations. See also 2.5; 2.7; 2.10; 2.19; 2.23; 2.28.

From McGrath, *Christian Theology Reader*, pg 42

When [the heretics] are refuted out of the Scriptures, they turn to accusing the Scriptures themselves, as if they were not right or did not possess authority, because the Scriptures contain a variety of statements, and because it is not possible for those who do not know the tradition to find the truth in them. For this has not been handed down by means of writings, but by the "living voice" ... And each one of them claims that this wisdom is something that he has come across by himself, which is clearly a fiction

Yet when we appeal once more to that tradition which is from the apostles, safeguarded in the churches by successions of presbyters, we provoke them into becoming the enemies of traditions, claiming to be wiser than those presbyters, and even the apostles themselves, and to have discovered the undefiled truth... Thus they end up agreeing with neither the Scriptures nor with tradition... Everyone who wishes to perceive the truth should consider the apostolic tradition, which has been made known in every church in the entire world. We are able to number those who are bishops" appointed by the apostles, and their successors in the churches to the present day, who taught and knew nothing of such things as these people imagine. For if the apostles had known secret mysteries (*recondita mysteria*) which they taught privately and secretly to the perfect, they would have passed them down to those to whom they entrusted the churches. For they would have wanted those who they left as their successors, and to whom they handed over their own office of authority (*locum magisterii*), to be perfect and blameless ...

We point to the greatest, most ancient and most glorious of churches, the church known to everyone, which was founded and established at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul, through which the apostolic tradition and the faith which is preached to humanity has come down to us through the successions of bishops ... For every church ought to agree with this church, on account of its powerful position, for in this church the apostolic tradition has always been preserved by the faithful...

Therefore, as there are so many demonstrations of this fact, there is no need to look anywhere else for the truth which we can easily obtain from the church. The apostles have, as it were, deposited this truth in all its fullness in this depository, so that whoever wants to may draw from this water of life. This is the gate of life; all others are thieves and robbers.