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Cottidie obsidemur. Living as Christians in a Non-Christian World: the Proposal of Tertullian.¹

1. *Tertullian in context: Christianity as a minority group and its relationship with the outside world.*

In order to better understand the way in which Tertullian faces the problem of the relationship between Christians and the Roman world they belong to – beliefs, norms, values, institutions, and social practices of the urban everyday life in a Roman town, we should keep in mind that ancient Christianity was, at least for the first three centuries of its history, what in sociological terms can be defined as a minority group, that is an aggregation of people, «differentiated from others in the same society by race, nationality, religion, or language – who both think of themselves as a differentiated group and are thought of by the others as a differentiated group with negative connotations».²

A group, moreover, that was really small for most of that period, though growing significantly. Although it is almost impossible to quantify the number of Christians in relation to the whole population of the Roman empire because the sources for a quantitative approach to the problem, such as that attempted by some scholars including the American sociologist Rodney Stark,³ are objectively very scarce, we can be pretty sure that even in the early fourth century, when Constantine decided to “open up” to Christianity adopting it as the main religious and cultural basis for his political project, he took a bold political gamble because he chose to stake on a group which was certainly relevant in socio-cultural terms, but still definitely a minority one in the overall

¹ English translation, slightly shortened and revised, of L.Lugaresi, *Cottidie obsidemur. Vivere da cristiani in un mondo non cristiano: la proposta di Tertulliano*, in A.M.Mazzanti-I.Vigorelli (a cura di), *Krisis e cambiamento in età tardoantica. Riflessi contemporanei*, (“Ricerche di ontologia relazionale” 3), Roma, EDUSC, 2017, pp.169-214.

² A.M. ROSE, Minorities, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 10, (New York: The Macmillan Company &The Free Press, 1968) 365-371, esp. 365.

³ R. STARK, *The Rise of Christianity: a Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); ID., *Cities of God. The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006). For a discussion of Stark's methodological approach see the monographic section dedicated to him in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): among the articles should be noted in particular K. HOPKINS, *Christian Number and Its Implications*, 185-226, based on methods that the author himself defines «frankly speculative and exploratory» (185) but rich in innovative and stimulating insights. Very critical of Stark's views and numbers is now T.A. ROBINSON, *Who were the First Christians? Dismantling the Urban Thesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) esp. 243-252.

framework of the Roman Empire. As mentioned, we are not able to furnish numbers,⁴ but we can think of two examples: Origen, that in the middle of the third century, arguing with Celsus, admits that Christians in the world are still πάνυ ὀλίγοι,⁵ and Gregory Thaumaturgus, who finds only seventeen Christians when he arrives in his diocese of Neo-Cesarea in Pontus, more or less at the same time.⁶ Perhaps we may have a more reliable and meaningful reference in what Eusebius writes about the consistency of the Roman clergy at the time of Pope Cornelius (251-253), which allows us to form the idea of a community which is not tiny but still a very small one compared to the whole population of the *Urbs*.⁷ In short, what can be said without controversy is that Christianity in the first three centuries from the historical and sociological point of view presents itself as a definitely minority group, irregularly distributed over the territory of the Empire, marked by a constantly high (or even increasing) growth rate, due to the missionary thrust that characterizes it throughout the period considered.⁸

Usually, we tend to understand the history of the development of Christianity in the Greek-Roman world according to the category of *christianization*,⁹ both before and after the so-called

⁴ Throughout this problem a still indispensable historiographical reference point is the broad overview offered by the classic work of ADOLF HARNACK, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten Jahrhunderten*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: J.C.Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1906) 5-262, but it should be said that research in this field is closely dependent on the different possibilities offered by sources in different geographical areas and social contexts. Prosopographic data, for example, provide relevant information about the conversion of Roman senatorial aristocracy: P. BROWN, Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy, *The Journal of Roman Studies* 51 (1961), 1-11, and T.D. BARNES, Statistics and the Conversion of the Roman Aristocracy, *The Journal of the Roman Studies* 85 (1995), 135-147. Another remarkable - as also much discussed - attempt to quantify the increase in the percentage of Christians in the population has been made, for Egypt, by R. BAGNALL, Religious Conversion and Onomastic Change, *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 19 (1982), 105-124, relying on the onomastic evidence of the rich papyrus documents that only that region has preserved. On this much debated issue see: E. WIPSYCKA, La valeur de l'onomastique pour l'histoire de la christianisation de l'Égypte. À propos d'une étude de R.S.Bagnall, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 62 (1986), 173-181, and more recently J.-M. CARRIÉ, Le nombre des chrétiens en Égypte selon les données papyrologiques, in H. INGLEBERT-S. DESTÉPHEN-B. DUMEZIL, *Le problème de la christianisation du monde antique* (Paris: Picard, 2010) 147-157, esp. 148-151; M. DEPAUW-W. CLARYSSE, How Christian was Fourth Century Egypt? Onomastic Perspectives on Conversion, *Vigiliae Christianae* 67 (2013), 407-435, and D. FRANKFURTER, Onomastic Statistic and Christianization of Egypt: A Response to Depauw and Clarysse, *Vigiliae Christianae* 68 (2014), 284-289. Bagnall's calculations, confirmed by Depauw and Clarysse, would lead to assume a proportion of about 20% Christian population in Egypt at the beginning of the fourth century, immediately before the conversion of Constantine.

⁵ ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, VIII, 69.

⁶ That is, exactly the same number of pagans who, according to the hagiographer, remain about thirty years later, at the time of his death in 270! See GREGORY OF NYSSA, *De vita Gregorii Thaumaturgi*, 27 and 95 (SCh 573, 130 and 218). On this point, P. MARAVAL in his introduction to GRÉGOIRE DE NYSSE, *Éloge de Grégoire le Thaumaturge. Éloge de Basile*, (Sources Chrétiennes n. 573) (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 2014) 31, observes that «la mention des dix-sept chrétiens [...], bien qu'elle soit probablement légendaire, reste une indication précieuse, car elle témoigne à la fois de la faible pénétration du christianisme dans cette contrée d'Asie mineure durant les premières décennies du III^e siècle et de son progrès au cours de la vie de Grégoire».

⁷ EUSEBIUS, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VI, 43,11. According to HARNACK, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung...*, 211-212, «diese Stelle ist in bezug auf die Statistik die wichtigste, die wir aus den drei ersten Jahrhunderten, die Kirchengeschichte anlagend, besitzen. Die römische Gemeinde hatte im Jahr 251 einen Klerus von 155 Personen (mit dem Bischofe), die sie unterhielt und ernährte, dazu über 1500 Witwen und Hilfsbedürftige. Ich möchte hiernach die Anzahl der zur katholischen Gemeinde in Rom gehörigen Christen nicht unter 30000 veranschlagen [...] etwa der dreißigste Teil der Bevölkerung».

⁸ This agrees with the generic portrait referring to the beginning of the second century, given us by EUSEBIUS, *Hist. Eccl.* III, 37, 2-4. In spite of much emphasis on the success of evangelization («at the first hearing whole multitudes of men eagerly embraced the religion of the Creator of the universe»: 37,3), he himself admits that he cannot provide even the number and names of the evangelizers.

⁹ On the concept of Christianization and the problems it entails, see the essays collected in INGLEBERT, DESTÉPHEN, DUMEZIL, *Le problème de la christianisation*; J.MAXWELL, *Paganism and Christianization*, in S.F.JOHNSON (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 849-875; E.WATTS, *Christianization*, in C.M.CHIN, M.VIDAS (ed.), *Late Ancient Knowing. Explorations in Intellectual History*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2015, 197-217.

“Constantinian turning-point”.¹⁰ It is mainly in this perspective that one questions the reasons and the ways in which Christianity “conquered” the Roman world,¹¹ and from the same approach derives the prominence achieved long ago in the historical debate by issues such as the “Conflict between Christians and Pagans”,¹² or as the question of the hellenization of Christianity opposed to the christianization of Hellenism.¹³ This type of interpretation, however, runs the risk of anachronism, in the form of a backward projection of settings and problems that more appropriately, if ever, apply to the period following the Constantinian turn. In other words, since in the course of the 4th and 5th centuries the Roman empire did become Christian, we tend to read the whole of the previous story as a function of this outcome.

On the contrary, it seems to us more correct and fruitful to approach the Christian history of the first three centuries with the main focus on trying to understand how a minority group handles the problem of its survival in a culturally and socially alienated, if not hostile context that inevitably exerts on the group itself a kind of intense and permanent osmotic pressure. A sort of a siege, to which refers the Tertullian's quotation, «cottidie obsidemur, cottidie prodimur» (Apol. 7, 4), cited in the title of this article. In particular, it is of great interest for us to try and understand how the way of dealing with such a problem has affected the attitude of this minority group leading them not to interrupt relations with the outside world, but rather to exert an increasing influence on it, so as to acquire a relevant position, far superior to its numerical consistency within that society.

We usually think that minority groups in conditions similar to those of the early Christians – a few thousand (and then tens of thousands) of individuals, grouped into small communities scattered over the immense territory of the empire, with a strong awareness of their cultural and religious diversity with respect to the context in which they are inserted but devoid of easily recognizable identity markers such as language, clothing and feeding codes or settlement in separate territorial portions –¹⁴ would tend to yield to the influence of the cultural patterns prevalent in the environment they belong to, so that members of the group go out of their way to act, speak, and think in most cases like everyone else, keeping only some elements of diversity related to delimited areas of existence (typically practices of worship, if it is a religious minority). Alternatively, in order to contrast the process of acculturation, perceived as a deadly danger for their own identity, members of a minority group could develop the opposite attitude of increasing isolation from the outside world to preserve themselves from the influence of the dominant culture. This usually also involves a drastic reduction in the group's ability to relate to the outside world since the closure of social networks prevents members of the group from communicating their own life experience and spreading their beliefs to other people. In Christian terms, there follows a dampening, if not the loss, of the missionary thrust. Taken to the extreme, this attitude leads to an attempt to get completely out of the socio-cultural context to which the group belongs, implementing some form of secession, collective (search for a new homeland, a “promised land”), or individual (anachoresis, “escape into the desert”).

¹⁰ It is remarkable, for instance, that the concept of christianization is referred to both in the title of a book that deals with the II-IV centuries, such as that of R. McMULLEN, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (a.D. 100-400)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) and in F. TROMBLEY, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization c.370-529*, I-II, (Leiden: Brill, 1993-1994), a work that is about the centuries following the Constantinian turn.

¹¹ D. PRAET, Explaining the Christianization of the Roman Empire. Older Theories and Recent Developments, *Sacris Erudiri* 33 (1992), 5-119.

¹² Just think of the classic *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century. Essays Edited by Arnaldo Momigliano* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

¹³ L. GAVRILYUK, Harnack's Hellenized Christianity or Florovsky's «Sacred Hellenism»: Questioning Two Metanarratives of Early Christian Engagement with Late Antique Culture, *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 54 (2010), 323-344.

¹⁴ Remember the description of Christian communities in *Ad Diognetum* 5, 1-2: Χριστιανοὶ γὰρ οὔτε γῆ οὔτε φωνῆ οὔτε ἔσθῃσι διακεκριμένοι τῶν λοιπῶν εἰσιν ἀνθρώπων. Οὔτε γὰρ που πόλεις ἰδίας κατοικοῦσιν οὔτε διαλέκτῳ τινὶ παρηλλαγμένῃ χρῶνται οὔτε βίον παράσημον ἀσκοῦσιν.

It is quite evident to those who know the history of ancient Christianity that throughout the course of the first three centuries Christians did not take any of the options we just described: they did not assimilate to the Greco-Roman culture; they did not isolate and dissociate themselves into a separate world and did not choose the logic of the sect (at least as far as mainstream Christianity was concerned: there were some sectarian tendencies, but they significantly, exercised their separating criticism first of all against the “great church” compromised with the world); they never planned nor dreamed an exit from the Roman world, that is to say, with a scriptural image, a collective escape from Egypt (if not in allegorical terms). Christians, as a people, never considered seceding: Tertullian, as we shall see, speculates about it, but only *ad absurdum*, as a mere possibility evoked in a sort of “mental experiment”. Certainly, from the end of the third century, monasticism introduced in the ecclesial experience a form of departure from the *polis* with the choice of a kind of life in the desert which could be taken for an example of such an option: but even the monastic anachoresis, which however concerns an elite of individuals, is more a way of detaching oneself and taking a critical distance from urban life than a true withdrawal from the city. Monks, in fact, went out of the urban social context but maintained a very close and influential relationship with the other Christians who remained in the world. Their extraordinary lives were a sort of benchmark for all those who continued to live “normally” in the urban space.

There is, however, another way in which a minority group can relate to the surrounding world exerting social and ideological pressure, and that is to have a highly critical relationship with the *other* – where by “critical”, we mean inspired by the reflexive capacity of a subject to think of himself in relation to another and communicate to the other such reflection, so as to trigger in him a similar reflexive process.¹⁵ A minority group, also because of its ability to maintain consistency and moral adherence to its own principles, can thus exert a cultural influence on the outside world,¹⁶ which may, in the long run, even put the cultural basis of the whole society under strain– although, at least in the case of ancient Christianity, without a precise agenda, but rather as the result of a course of action aimed first and foremost at safeguarding its identity. The fundamental question that we should ask, therefore, is not: “how did Christians manage to conquer the Roman empire?” but instead “how did they manage to live as Christians in a completely non-Christian world?”, that is a world they perceived as alien and/or hostile to Christ.

Christianity was actually able to make, over the course of a few centuries, a true change of cultural paradigm, gaining more and more a central position in the public space, thus shifting from the state of *exitiabilis superstitio*¹⁷ and *dementia*¹⁸ incompatible with participation in civil life to the acceptance by Constantine of its full suitability to serve as the religious and cultural foundation of the empire, though Christians had not yet become the majority or not even a large minority of the population.¹⁹ This paper proposes, referring to Tertullian's work, that a central factor in the process of the “minority influence” exercised by Christianity on Roman society and culture is the importance that the cultural dimension acquires in Christian life through the practice of judgement.

¹⁵ I refer to the concept of relational reflexivity as employed by P. DONATI, *Sociologia della riflessività. Come si entra nel dopo-moderno* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011) 313: «Essere umani significa essere riflessivi, ma riflessivi non solo in Sé e per Sé, come individui che si personalizzano attraverso la propria conversazione interiore, bensì riflessivi anche sulle, attraverso e per le relazioni sociali che ci fanno riflettere su noi stessi, sulla nostra identità, sulle nostre scelte [...] perché e in quanto ciascuno si costituisce relazionalmente con gli altri significativi, attraverso quella sfera intermedia in cui stanno i beni e i mali relazionali, con la loro propria riflessività. [...] la riflessività, in quanto attività propria della coscienza umana, ci impone (dentro di noi, ma anche come reciprocità verso l'Altro) di considerare le premesse e gli effetti delle nostre decisioni e azioni sulle relazioni, sia le relazioni con noi stessi che quelle con gli altri».

¹⁶ About the concept of minority influence, see S.MOSCOVICI, *Social Influence and Social Change* (London: Academic Press, 1976).

¹⁷ TACITUS, *Annales*, 15, 44,5.

¹⁸ On the allegation of *dementia* moved to Christians see F.RUGGIERO, *La follia dei cristiani. Su un aspetto della reazione pagana tra I e V secolo* (Milano: Il saggiatore,1992).

¹⁹ The number of Christians at the beginning of the 4th century is commonly estimated by historians around 10% of the total population of the Roman Empire, in turn estimated to be around 60 million people. For a critical evaluation of these estimates, see now ROBINSON, *Who were the First Christians...*, esp. 24-40.

Christianity, from its very beginning, was never (only) a cult, or (only) an orthopraxis, understood as a pure and simple execution of a set of rules of conduct: the Christian faith always involves the assiduous practice of critical reflection on every aspect of personal and social life, because in its perspective the fact of Christ invests the whole perception of reality and judges it down to the details. The faithful, therefore, are continually provoked to judge their lives in relation to Christ and the world in which they live, so that the dimension of judgement is therefore essential and indispensable to the Christian experience. Driven by their faith to “test everything and hold fast what is good”,²⁰ Christians went thus a long way in the Roman imperial society, a way that was neither assimilation to the majority culture nor self-isolation or even less secession, not even the programmatic pursuit of a position of power that would allow them to “conquer” the political space, but rather a process leading to the *krisis* of that culture and, consequently, of the dominant social and political structure.

2. *Krisis as the Christian form of relationship with the pagan world in Tertullian's proposal.*

Tertullian's appraisal of Greek and Roman social and cultural institutions, far from having only a defensive role in order to protect the small flock of Christians from the danger of pagan contamination, is so detailed as to point out weaknesses, contradictions and internal tensions in those systems, hence promoting their "crisis".²¹ It is in this context that must be considered and better understood the highly polemical tone which has always been referred to as peculiar to Tertullian compared to other Christian apologists of the second century, but which has often been reduced to an aspect of his temper of «ardens vir [...] acris et vehementis ingenii», as portrayed by Jerome;²² or merely attributed to his alleged ideological extremism²³ or even to his “africanity”;²⁴ or basically considered an effect of external circumstances to be assessed case by case in order to reach a more accurate understanding of our author.²⁵

In particular, his typical fondness for reversing the accusations against the adversaries – as he often does not simply reject the accusations and the suspicions against Christians but retaliates – has been seen mostly as a rhetorical device (a good technique for lawyers, for whom, as we all know, anything is usable to support their cause), if not as a symptom of poorly controlled psychological aggression, but it seems to us that its true meaning has not been adequately understood.²⁶ Tertullian's will to move the *focus* of the discussion onto the pagans, so clearly

²⁰ 1 Ts 5,21: πάντα δὲ δοκιμάζετε, τὸ χαλὸν κατέχετε.

²¹ This is something more, but at the same time it is intimately linked to that identification function that rightly F.CHAPOT, *Ouverture et résistance. Deux approches de la relation de l'Église avec l'extérieur au II^e-III^e siècles*, *Revue des sciences religieuses* 81 (2007) 7-26, sees as a feature of the Christian literature of the time of Tertullian.

²² JEROME, *Epistulae*, 84,2 and *De viris illustribus*, 53. The tendency to resolve the complexity and the apparent contradictions of Tertullian's personality and his vision of the world ultimately depending on his character is, for example, a flaw in the book, though important and useful, of C.RAMBAUX, *Tertullian face au morales des trois premiers siècles* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1979).

²³ Although it is difficult to explain why this attitude is present both in the catholic and in the montanist Tertullian.

²⁴ R.BRAUN, *Aux origines de la Chrétienté d'Afrique: un homme de combat, Tertullien*, *Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé* (juin 1965), 189-208.

²⁵ J.-C.FREDOUILLE, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique. Deuxième édition, complétée par la bibliographie de l'auteur* (Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes, 2012) esp. 20; 181-187.

²⁶ The meaning of Tertullian's *retorsio* as a means of emphasizing «the constructive role of Christianity in and for Roman Society» has been well understood in the important article of M.S.BURROWS, *Christianity in the Roman Forum: Tertullian and the Apologetic Use of History*, *Vigiliae Christianae* 42 (1988) 209-235, esp. 210.

programmed by him at the beginning of *Apologeticum*, has to be taken a lot more seriously than it usually is:²⁷

iam de causa innocentiae consistam, nec tantum refutabo quae nobis obiciuntur, sed etiam in ipsos retorquebo, qui obiciunt, ut ex hoc quoque sciant homines in Christianis non esse quae in se nesciunt esse, simul uti erubescant accusantes, non dico pessimi optimos, se iam, ut volunt, compares suos.²⁸

It is very clear from these words that Tertullian *retorsio* consciously proposes to be a form of judgement that undermines the pagan society because it obliges it to reflect on its Christian counterpart, thus activating a process of reflexivity – thanks to a compulsory confrontation with an opponent who at this point is no longer totally different but recognized by contrast as a sort of *alter ego*. The *retorsio* against the pagans of the same accusations falsely levelled at the Christians aims to put each of them in the condition of having to ponder (i.e. to feel the weight of, according to the etymological meaning of the verb) their own fault, starting from the proven innocence of the Christian *alter ego* with which they were confronted.

2.1 *Christianity in society: not factio but curia.*

The first aspect of this "critical mode" of the ancient Christianity's approach to pagan society that we want to take into account refers precisely to its self-presentation as a social group within the civil community. The awareness of being a minority group is reflected in the use of the word *secta*, entirely normal in Tertullian language, to designate the Christian community.²⁹ Although in Latin the word has no negative connotations, there is no doubt that it expresses the idea of a kind of sequel (*secta*, from *sequor*) that distinguishes and separates a group from the whole society, thus creating *ipso facto* a tension between the part and the whole: firstly, it means "conduct, rule of life", then it can be applied to a "party", a "philosophical school", and to a religious group as well. The tension between a part and the whole is, however, much more strongly emphasized by the term *factio*, whose semantic connotation implies the idea of a particular group coming into conflict with, or at least potentially being in strong opposition to the society as a whole, since it challenges its values and threatens to undermine peace and concord. Can the Christian community define itself, or accept to be defined as *factio*?

Tertullian devotes a long section of the *Apologeticum*, from chapter 38 to chapter 41 to this issue, starting from the assertion that Christianity cannot be counted among the *factiones illicitae* because it doesn't do anything of what the laws against the latter condemn.³⁰ The reason why *factiones* are banned, in fact, «de providentia constat modestiae publicae, ne civitas in partes scinderetur».³¹ Any *factio*, by its nature, is only a part and, as such, pursues particular interests which could clash with the primary objective of the "ecumenical" power of the empire, i.e. to preserve unity and stability in the political space (ὁμόνοια), so it is logical for the imperial

²⁷ On the use of *retorsio* in Christian apologetics in general, see M.FIEDROWICZ, *Apologie im frühen Christentum. Die Kontroverse um den christlichen Wahrheitsanspruch in den ersten Jahrhunderten* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000) 162-164. On a particular aspect in Tertullian: T.GEORGES, *Retorsio aus theologischer Perspektive: Gerichtsszene und maiestas in Tertullians Apologeticum*, in F.R.PROSTMEIER (hrsg.), *Frühchristentum und Kultur* (Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 2007) 223-235.

²⁸ TERTULLIAN, *Apologeticum*, 4,1.

²⁹ To provide only one example, TERTULLIAN, *Ad Scapulam*, 1,1 opens with the explicit, and almost obvious recognition of pagan hostility as a condition implicitly envisaged by new members in joining the Christian *secta*: «Nos quidem neque expavescimus neque pertimescimus ea quae ab ignorantibus patimur, cum ad hanc sectam, utique suscepta condicione eius pacti, venerimus ut etiam animas nostras exauctorati in has pugnas accedamus [...]».

³⁰ TERTULLIAN, *Apol.* 38,1: «nec paulo lenius inter illicitas factiones sectam istam deputari oportebat, a qua nihil tale committitur, quale de illicitis factionibus praecavetur».

³¹ *Apol.* 38,2.

legislation to repress them. Christians on the contrary, says Tertullian, are by nature “ecumenical” and totally alien to any party spirit; therefore they do not think of themselves as a party:

At enim nobis ab omni gloriae et dignitatis ardore frigentibus nulla est necessitas coetus, nec ulla magis res aliena quam publica. Unam omnium rem publicam agnoscimus, mundum.³²

Here he goes so far as to refrain from qualifying Christianity as a *coetus*, and therefore does not seem to claim its public visibility and sociological relevance. This may seem in contradiction to what he states shortly after, at the beginning of chapter 39, where he does not hesitate to speak, as we shall see, of *Christiana factio*, *coetus* and *congregatio* to qualify the nature of the Christian subject.³³ When he says «nobis nulla est necessitas coetus», what he actually means is that there cannot be, in his opinion, a Christian subject that stands as a part of the political body, i.e. under the rules of the “political space”. Christianity obviously lives in the *polis*, and is well visible, but it goes beyond or, if you prefer, above the political space, because its horizon is the ecumenical one of the whole world (which in its turn is here politically defined as «omnium res publica»). From this point of view, it can be said that Christianity does not need to take sides to be present in the political space, indeed it refuses that mentality. This does not mean, however, that Christians should not make radical choices with respect to the social context in which they live and therefore avoid to go against current, but only that such choices must be interpreted in a completely different way from political logic as commonly understood.

For example, the refusal to attend public spectacles - for which Christians were harshly rebuked because it was considered a form of desertion from the duties of civic integration and thus a hostile act against the *polis* – from Tertullian's point of view takes on the opposite meaning because, instead of breaking the *concordia*, it is even a wise choice not to take part in emotionally destabilizing and potentially divisive manifestations.³⁴ The same can be said of other expressive forms of pagan *sociabilité* in which Christians do not participate, such as *convivia*, whose social danger is implicitly denounced by Tertullian by comparison with the peaceful conduct of Christian agapes: from the excesses of pagan banquets derive quarrels and brawls, i.e. disturbances of public order, whereas from the sober Christian dinners people go away quietly

non in catervas caesionum nec in classes discursationum nec in inceptions lasciviarum, sed ad eandem curam modestiae et pudicitiae, ut qui non tam cenam cenaverint quam disciplinam.³⁵

At this point Tertullian invokes another *secta*, the Epicurean, significantly the farthest from Christianity:

Licuit Epicureis aliam decernere voluptatis veritatem, id est animi aequitatem: in quo vos offendimus, si alias praesumimus voluptates? Si oblectari novissime nolumus, nostra iniuria est, si forte, non vestra. Sed reprobamus, quae placent vobis! Nec vos nostra delectant.³⁶

This ostensibly incidental annotation is a crucial step in Tertullian's strategy, because it serves to introduce what we might call a “redefinition of the playing field” with respect to the expectations of his pagan opponents (but also of his Christian readers!). What he intends to question is, in fact, the

³² *Apol.* 38,3.

³³ *Apol.* 39,1-2.

³⁴ This is the theme of *insania circi*, many times recurring in Christian authors. See, for example, *Apol.* 38,4: «Atque adeo spectaculis vestris in tantum renuntiamus, in quantum originibus eorum, quas scimus de superstitione conceptas, cum et ipsis rebus, de quibus transiguntur, praetersumus. Nihil enim nobis dictu, visu, auditu cum insania circi, cum impudicitia theatri, cum atrocitate arenae, cume xysti vanitate». On this topic see L.LUGARESI, *Il teatro di Dio. Il problema degli spettacoli nel cristianesimo antico (II-IV secolo)*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2008, esp. about Tertullian 377-462.

³⁵ *Apol.* 39,19.

³⁶ *Apol.* 38,5.

operating system of the “ludic field” based, as is well known, on the opposition between the exceptionality of its chronotope and the normality of ordinary life, opposition to which it binds intrinsically (and almost necessarily) the legitimization of excess, transgression, exemption from ordinary moral rules as a peculiar characteristic of the *voluptas ludorum*. But this way of operating – or this *habitus*, to continue using Bourdieu's terminology – is not the only one: it already exists, Tertullian objects, at least one exception that pagans peacefully accept, since Epicurus and his followers are allowed to have a completely different vision of the *voluptas*, which does not admit the release of violent emotions and the consummation of excessive pleasures but is based on the pursuit of the *aequitas animi*. But, if that is the case, why should not Christians too be allowed to play in the “ludic field” with their own way of understanding the *voluptas*? The framework of the playing field is thus profoundly modified, and not only in the sense of its pluralistic declination: Tertullian takes a further step because he insinuates that this coexistence of different and incompatible *voluptates* could induce both Christians and pagans to what today we would call a dialogic reflexivity: «reprobamus, quae placent vobis nec vos nostra delectant», we criticize what you like, while you do not like “our pleasures”.

Once this fundamental change of paradigm is experienced on a central issue like that of the *ludi*, our author can return to the question of whether Christianity is a *factio*. This time he can openly recognize its minority group character as distinct from and opposed to the rest of the *polis*.³⁷ *Christiana factio* becomes a formula that can be proclaimed openly, and the theological depth and strength of the associative bond linking Christians is explicitly declared through the use of the intriguing metaphor of the body.³⁸ If we want to consider it a *factio*, Christianity is a good *factio*, whose action is positive, indeed indispensable for all: the Christian *coetus* is a fundamental element of stability for the whole empire. The rest of the long chapter (*Apologeticum*, 39) is devoted by Tertullian to a detailed description of the Christian *politeia*, from the moments of catechetical meeting (39,3-4) to the role of the *probati seniores* who preside over them (39,5), the management of economic resources (39,5-6), sexual ethics (39,11-13), and fraternal agapes (39,14,16-19). This kind of self-certification of good conduct – in which the element of judgement passed on external reality, which is also a way of provoking pagan self-criticism, is never absent –³⁹ culminates in a synthetic formula that reinterprets and radically changes the concept of *factio*: «Cum probi, cum boni coeunt, cum pii, cum casti congregantur, non est factio dicenda, sed curia».⁴⁰ Christianity is not *factio*, – a centrifugal element that exerts a disintegrating drive on society which therefore must be repressed and marginalized by the political power – but *curia*, i.e. an elite group in the service of the common good.

It seems entirely consistent, from Tertullian's point of view, that, on the contrary, it can be called *factio* (this time with all the negative connotations that the word carries) precisely the anti-Christian majority (no matter how big).⁴¹ In the strict logic of the Tertullian representation, the parts

³⁷ *Apol.* 39,1: «Edam iam nunc ego ipse negotia Christianae factionis, ut, qui mala refutaverim, bona ostendam».

³⁸ *Apol.* 39,1-2: «Corpus sumus de conscientia religionis et disciplinae unitate et spei foedere. Coimus in coetum et congregationem, ut ad deum quasi manu facta precationibus ambiamus orantes. Haec vis deo grata est. Oramus etiam pro imperatoribus, pro ministris eorum et potestatibus, pro statu saeculi, pro rerum quiete, pro mora finis»». See E.R.URCIUOLI, «Factio Christiana». *Nouvel examen du rapport entre les premiers groupes de croyants en Christe et les associations volontaires antiques*, *Apocrypha* 22 (2011) 253-264.

³⁹ See the prominence that the dimension of judgement has in the catechetical meetings: «Coimus ad litterarum divinarum commemorationem, si quid praesentium temporum qualitas aut praemonere cogit aut recognoscere. [...] Ibidem etiam exhortationes, castigationes et censura divina. Nam et iudicatur magno cum pondere, ut apud certos de Dei conspectu, summumque futuri iudicii praeiudicium est, si quis ita deliquerit, ut a communicatione orationis et conventus et monis sancti commercii relegetur» (*Apol.* 39,3-4). See also the implicit comparison between Christian and pagan banquets (39,15-19), mentioned above. Thus a characteristic of Christianity that is emphasized by Tertullian as a positive factor for the stability of the whole society is the fact that it is a judging community.

⁴⁰ *Apol.* 39,21.

⁴¹ *Apol.* 40,1-2: «At e contrario illis nomen factionis accommodandum est, qui in odium bonorum et proborum conspirant, qui adversum sanguinem innocentium conclamant, praetextentes sane ad odii defensionem illam quoque vanitatem, quod existiment omnis publicae cladis, omnis popularis incommodi Christianos esse in causa[m]».

are inverted and Christian *retorsio* levels against the pagan masses an accusation very similar to that of *odium humani generis* that already stigmatized the small Christian minority at the time of its first appearance in the political space, in the Rome of Nero.⁴² Now it is the turn of the Christian orator to address the adversaries as «importuni humanis rebus» and to point out that their contempt for the true God seriously harms the security and well-being of the Roman state.⁴³

To better understand the importance and even the novelty of what Tertullian is trying to do, it may be appropriate to compare the picture of the position of Christians in the world that he apologetically paints with what only a few years before and with opposing intentions, the pagan philosopher Celsus had used, describing in a disrespectful manner the action of illiterate and coarse Christian preachers who only address simple and unaware people as «slaves, low rank women and little boys» but avoid any «meeting of wise men» because they are afraid to expose to learned people the secret doctrines they proudly proclaim «where they see children and a large number of slaves and crowds of stupid men».⁴⁴ What emerges from Celsus pages is the description of an absolutely marginal group that moves in a semi-clandestine manner in the lower strata of society, avoiding any contact with qualified representatives of the pagan culture and turning away from places officially devoted to cultural and political debate. Celsus considers them, and wants his readers to share his opinion, subjects totally alien to the field of culture, as symbolically indicated by the places and interlocutors Christians choose to interact with. Such exclusion from the field of culture operates as a preventive condemnation: whatever the self-styled Christian teachers can say and do, they cannot be taken seriously into consideration because anyway they are “out”.⁴⁵ Tertullian, on the contrary, “puts them in” the middle of political space, boldly (if one thinks of what actually in all probability was at the time the force ratio between Christians and pagans) placing them in a prominent position.

2.2. *Changing the fields of culture and religion.*

What makes possible this radical change of perspective to the point that Christianity, marginal or actually out of political space, in Tertullian's view is to become central and even aspire to play an important role for stability and order in the Roman society? What can such a bold operation be based on? I think it can be said that Tertullian in fact operates what could be called a redefinition of the cultural field and of the rules with which it functions in the Hellenistic-Roman context and a similar operation is also performed regarding Judaism. He breaks the rules and redraws the boundaries of the debate as established by the religious and cultural systems. Thus he refuses to be locked in a predetermined position without leaving the field, indeed claiming to have the same right of speech as his adversaries within it and speaking their very language. In a sense, he behaves like a player who demands to redefine the limits of the playing field and the rules of the game. His fundamental move – as is already clear in the *Apologeticum*, especially in c. 17, and above all in the *De testimonio animae* which is entirely devoted to this subject – consists, so to speak, in taking a step backwards from the system of *paideia* – that indispensable process of shaping man into his true form that distinguishes and separates (true) humanity from barbarism, recognizing as a man only him who is imbued of *humanae litterae*. Tertullian finds *before* it, in the simple created human nature (which, precisely since created, necessarily contains in itself a reference, at least implicitly, to God who created it) the point of departure from which, turning back to the system of *paideia*, to question and to criticize it. Simple human nature comes first and is worth more than *humanitas* as

⁴² See TACITUS, *Annales* 15, 44: «[...] quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Christianos appellabat [...] eorum multitudo ingens haud proinde in crimine incendii quam odio humani generis convicti sunt [...] sontes et novissima exempla meritos [...]».

⁴³ TERTULLIAN, *Apol.* 41,1: «Vos igitur importuni rebus humanis, vos rei, publicorum incommodorum illices semper, apud quos deus spernitur, statuae adorantur».

⁴⁴ See the text of Celsus in ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, 3,44.50.55 *passim*.

⁴⁵ On this marginalization strategy and Christian responses to it, see now K.PIETZNER, *Bildung, Elite und Konkurrenz. Heiden und Christen vor der Zeit Constantins* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

classical culture meant it, for a man is a man because he is a being made by God's hands, not as the fruit of the cultivating effort of the *paideia*.

Once acquired this “anthropological before”, Tertullian can, starting from there, come back to the culture field and re-enter the dialogue with what is also for him the only and one civilization, the Greek-Roman, using, as an insider, all the intellectual instruments it can provide him. In this way he deprives the pagan culture of the earlier benefit derived from the control of the field since it no longer coincides with the *humanitas* tout court, the pre-judgement having been removed that truly man, fully man is only the man cultivated through *paideia*. The soul that was not formed by *paideia*, however, is not a *tabula rasa*: it is endowed - in Tertullian's opinion - with the awareness of some elementary evidence on which Christians can start to base their criticism of pagan culture. In other words, if Celsus, as we have seen above, expelled Christians from the field of culture to disqualify them as interlocutors and declare them out of play, Tertullian aims to do the opposite: the Christians themselves seem to want to step back from that field, but not to get out of it, on the contrary they want to extend it, change its boundaries and the rules of the game.

This strategic move is accomplished by our apologist at the beginning of his activity,⁴⁶ but then it remains as a permanent element of his position, which does not need to be explicitly stated over and over again but which, if necessary, can be summoned very quickly.⁴⁷ In the *Apologeticum* Tertullian states that the soul of man (of every man), though «carcere corporis pressa», «institutionibus pravis circumscripta» and «falsis deis exancillata», when it returns to itself and resumes its natural faculties calls God by this name, which is the very name of the true God («deum nominat hoc solo nomine, quia proprio Dei veri»); moreover, it recognizes that God is a judge whenever it pronounces sentences such as «deus videt», «deo mendo» or «deus mihi reddet».⁴⁸ Tertullian comments on these empirical remarks with the famous words that everyone knows: «O testimonium animae naturaliter Christianae!». What immediately follows is perhaps less frequently taken into account, but not less important: «Denique pronuntians haec not in Capitolium, sed at caelum respicit ».⁴⁹ When a man, even though enslaved to false gods, and confined to the system of *pravae institutiones* of paganism, lets out from the bottom of his soul an invocation to God, he has already left the space of *theologia civilis* and come into the *theologia physica*, in the terms of Varro: that's why Tertullian says that the soul speaking these words looks toward the sky, not towards the Capitol.

What in the *Apologeticum* is only briefly mentioned within a wider and more complex discussion, becomes the central argument of the *De testimonio animae*. In this short treaty it is explicitly stated, from the very beginning, that the strategic choice for the Christian apologist is to leave the world of the Greek-Roman *paideia*, i.e. the common culture, to find, outside and before it, a basis upon which to build the Christian *krisis* of paganism. Since any Christian apologetic discourse that is totally contained within the domain of the mainstream culture of the adversary (1,1-3) is ineffective because the «humana de incredulitate duritia» (1,3), which controls the rules of the game, deprives of value all the arguments that Christians could present referring to that same cultural heritage, Tertullian announces a drastic change of course: «Iam igitur nihil nobis erit cum litteris et doctrina perversae felicitatis, cui in falso potius creditur quam in vero».⁵⁰ But this departure from the field of pagan culture is not an escape route to seek shelter in the field of a Christian “counterculture” to be constructed as an alternative. Pagans – our author wittily observes – if they don't accept testimonies favorable to the Christian theses from their poets and philosophers, shy even more away from the Christian scriptures, that no one reads unless already converted: «Tanto abest, ut nostris litteris annuant homines, ad quas nemo venit nisi iam

⁴⁶ *Apologeticum* and *De testimonio animae*, as well known, are Tertullian's early works dating back to 197.

⁴⁷ See, for example, in the later (of 212) *Ad Scapulam*, 2,1: «Nos unum Deum colimus, quem omnes naturaliter nostis, ad cuius fulgura et tonitrua contremiscitis, ad cuius beneficia gaudetis».

⁴⁸ TERTULLIAN, *Apol.* 17,5-6.

⁴⁹ *Apol.* 17,6.

⁵⁰ TERTULLIAN, *De testimonio animae*, 1,4.

Christianus». ⁵¹ Therefore, it is not enough to change *auctores*, it takes much more: a real break in the cultural field is needed, which can be made by causing it to collide with an outside reality:

Novum testimonium advoco, immo omni litteratura notius, omni doctrina agitatius, omni editione vulgatius, toto homine maius id est totum quod est hominis. Consiste in medio, anima [...]. Sed non eam te advoco, quae scholis formata, bybliotheis exercitata, academiis et porticibus Atticis pasta sapientiam ructas. Te simplicem et rudem et impolitam et idioticam compello, qualem te habent qui te solam habent, illam ipsam de compito, de trivio, de textrino totam. Imperitia tua mihi opus est, quoniam aliquantulae peritiae tuae nemo credit. ⁵²

The testimony of the soul for Tertullian is so decisive because, as he immediately points out, its authority comes from nature, i.e. from God who creates nature. Nature is the master of the soul, and the master of nature is God. ⁵³ Even though the soul has been deceived by the devil, it does not lose memory of the fundamentals (God has created it; He is good and just; He will judge it) and that is enough to validate its testimony. ⁵⁴

By broadening the perspective from the individual to the people as a whole, starting from the idea of the *anima naturaliter christiana*, Tertullian argues that each nation must be considered “Christian” too as it is made up of persons with the same implicitly Christian elementary evidence in their minds. This is why he goes as far as to reject the current definition of the Christian people as a *tertium genus*, i.e. after the Greeks (and Romans) and the Jews, and to claim for it the rank of *primum genus*. ⁵⁵ The link with what we have just said is clear: as long as Christians are subject to the rules of the field of culture, in the ancient historical perspective that affirms the superiority of what comes first with respect to what comes later, they can at best aspire to be recognized as a “third people”, in an ineliminable condition of diversity and inferiority to the other two, which, as Tertullian sharply remarks, assimilates them to “monsters”. On the contrary, once the boundaries of the field of culture with their its ethnological considerations limits have been broken opened, it can be argued that the “first people”, however defined, is in any case *naturaliter* Christian.

There is, however, an objection with which Tertullian has to deal and which is likely to confine again the testimony of the soul within the fence of culture: the so called natural (or creatural) evidences of the soul are not, indeed, cultural products rather than natural realities as they are claimed to be? According to this thesis, the «eruptiones animae» are by no means the immediate and veritable expression of a «doctrina naturae», nor do they contain deep mysteries entrusted to innate consciousness («congenitae et ingenitae conscientiae tacita commissa»), but are merely opinions that derive from what has long been written and published («opiniones publicatarum litterarum») and have spread to the point of becoming common property of the illiterate as well. ⁵⁶ The soul has actually learned from others, although unaware, what it believes to be innate

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² TERTULLIAN, *Test. an.* 1, 5.6-7.

⁵³ TERTULLIAN, *Test. an.* 5,1: «Haec testimonia animae quanto vera, tanto simplicia, quanto simplicia, tanto vulgaria, quanto vulgaria, tanto communia, quanto communia, tanto naturalia, quanto naturalia, tanto divina. Non puto cuiquam frivola et ridicula videri posse, si recogitet naturae maiestatem, ex qua censetur auctoritas animae. Quantum dederis magistrae, tantum adiudicabis discipulae. Magistra natura, anima discipula. Quicquid aut illa edocuit aut ista perdidicit, a deo traditum est, magistro scilicet ipsius magistrae».

⁵⁴ *Ibidem* 5,2: «Etiam circumventa ad adversario meminit sui auctoris et bonitatis et decreti eius et exitus sui et adversarii ipsius».

⁵⁵ This, in fact, is most likely the meaning that must be attributed to TERTULLIAN, *Ad nationes*, I, 8,1.9-10: «Plane, tertium genus dicimur. Cynopennae aliqui, vel Sciapodes vel aliqui de subterraneo Antipodes? [...] Verum recogitate, ne quos tertium genus dicitis, principem locum optineat, siquidem non ulla gens non Christiana. Itaque quaecumque gens prima, nihilominus Christiana: ridicula dementia novissimos dicitis et tertios nominatis». On the interpretation of this passage see N.BROX, “*Non ulla gens non christiana*” (zu Tertullian, *Ad Nat.* 1,8,9), «*Vigiliae Christianae*» 27 (1973), 46-49.

⁵⁶ TERTULLIAN, *Test. an.* 5,3: «Sed qui eiusmodi eruptiones animae non putavit doctrinam esse naturae et congenitae et ingenitae conscientiae tacita commissa, dicet potius divitilatis in vulgus opinionibus publicatarum litterarum usum iam et quasi vitium corroboratum taliter sermocinandi».

knowledge. To this serious argument Tertullian replies that the soul comes long before literacy and that language exists long before books, so literature could not have dealt with things that the human experience did not already know.⁵⁷ It is an objection, in fact, that would seem to have a more solid foundation, if we go beyond this obvious chronological observation and we reflect that the argument of the *testimonium animae* produced by Tertullian rests essentially on a mere linguistic basis, i.e. that the soul pronounces the proper name of God “naturally” and thereby gives its testimony to the true God revealed by the Christian faith. Obviously this reasoning postulates that language, in turn, is not a cultural fact – as such produced by man (and subjected to the influence of demons) – but the direct expression of the truth imprinted in the nature of things by God's creative action. The relationship between truth and language is really a central theme in Tertullian's thought and it was recently thoroughly investigated by Frédéric Chapot in an important book which it suffices here to refer to.⁵⁸ Realizing the insidiousness of the claim that languages too are products of particular cultures, Tertullian replies that the evidence provided by the soul, while being linguistic, is not linked to any particular idiom, i.e. does not depend on Latin or Greek grammar, but belongs to a deeper linguistic level of universal significance.⁵⁹

Once the truthfulness of the natural testimony of the soul has been established, it is possible for Tertullian to challenge the pagan culture (which for him, as for all in the Greek-Roman world of his time, is the one and only culture), showing that it is in contradiction with the soul itself. That means the possibility of a real identity crisis of the pagan man, since, as a pagan, he has to deny what as a man he believes in the depths of his soul.⁶⁰ The consequence of this rupture of the field of culture through the appeal to the pre-cultural testimony of the soul is that even though Christians as such are driven into the corner and silenced by the pagan cultural system, the truth prevails by its natural evidence. Truth is omnipresent, so it also occupies the political space: the soul of man proclaims *suo iure* what the Christians are not allowed to whisper:

Deus ubique et bonitas dei ubique, daemonium ubique et maledictio daemonii ubique,
iudicii divini invocatio ubique, mors ubique et conscientia mortis ubique, et testimonium ubique.
Omnis anima suo iure proclamatur quae nobis nec mutire conceditur.⁶¹

At this point it is time for the pagans to be accused of and blamed for inconsistency. In the kind of imaginary court set up by Tertullian, the pagan soul plays the double role of accusatory witness and defendant and gives itself the reasons why it is found guilty.⁶²

⁵⁷ *Ibidem* 5,4: «Certe prior anima quam littera et prior sermo quam liber et prior sensus quam stilus et prior homo ipse quam philosophus et poeta». The rejection of the thesis that the elementary evidences of the soul are a cultural product goes on for the rest of the chapter: 5, 4-7.

⁵⁸ F.CHAPOT, *Virtus veritatis. Langage et vérité dans l'oeuvre de Tertullien*, (Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes, 2009). See also C.RAMBAUX, *L'accès à la vérité chez Tertullien* (Bruxelles: Latomus, 2005).

⁵⁹ TERTULLIAN, *Test. an.* 6,3: «Vanus es, si huic linguae soli aut Graecae, quae propincae inter se habentur, reputabis eiusmodi, ut neges naturae universitatem. Non Latinis nec Argivis solis anima de caelo cadit. Omnium gentium unus homo, varium nomen est; una anima, varia vox, unus spiritus, varius sonus, propria cuique genti loquela, sed loquela materia communis».

⁶⁰ With these words Tertullian, *Test. an.* 6,1-2, addresses his ideal pagan interlocutor, exhorting him to investigate this contradiction «Si tu tuis litteris dubitas, neque deus neque natura mentitur. Ut et naturae et deo credas, crede animae, ita fiet ut et tibi credas. Illa certe est quam tanti facis, quantum illa te facit, cuius es totus, quae tibi omnia est, sine qua nec vivere potes nec mori, propter quam deos negligis. Cum enim times fieri Christianus, eam conveni. Cur cum alios colat, deum nominat? Cur, cum maledicendo spiritus denotat, daemonia pronuntiat? Cur ad caelum contestatur et ad terram detestatur? Cur alibi servit, alibi vindicem convenit? Cur de mortuis iudicat? Cur verba habet Christianorum, quos nec auditos visosque vult? Cur aut nobis dedit ea verba, aut accepit a nobis? Cur aut docuit aut didicit? Suspectam habes convenientiam praedicationis in tanta disconvenientia conversationis».

⁶¹ *Ibidem* 6,4-5.

⁶² *Ibidem* 6,5-6: «Merito igitur omnis anima et rea et testis est, in tantum et rea erroris, in quantum et testis veritatis, et stabit ante aulas dei die iudicii nihil habens dicere. Deum praedicabas et non requirebas, daemonia abominabaris et illa adorabas; iudicium dei appellabas nec esse credebas, inferna supplicia praesumebas et non praecavebas; Christianum nomen sapiebas et Christianum nomen persequeris».

Alongside this challenge to Greek-Roman culture, Tertullian advocates a similar approach to the other closed system which Christians must confront, the Law and the Jewish “monopoly” on it. This aspect of the issue cannot be analyzed in the present essay: suffice it to say that Tertullian's starting point is that the Jewish view that there is only *one* people and the rest are «gentes velut stillicidium de urceo aut pulvis ex area» must be overcome because, as the Scripture itself states, there are «ex utero Rebeccae duo populi et duae gentes».⁶³

Moreover, if it is true that there is only one divine law, it must be universal and precede the Mosaic law, which is only a particular declination of the *lex primordialis* enunciated by God to Adam and Eve, where, in fact, the whole Mosaic law was already contained *in nuce*. That law moving from the divine judgement is therefore *in principle* inscribed in nature, and coincides with the law of Christ.⁶⁴ In summary, Tertullian's point is: «Denique ante legem Moysei scriptam in tabulis lapideis legem fuisse contendo non scriptam, quae naturaliter intellegebatur et a patribus custodiebatur».⁶⁵

Put in this perspective, the Mosaic law is seen as part of a process of which it is only a stage: God's legislative activity does not end with it, but as it was done before Moses, so it continues after him. One cannot imagine depriving God of the power to intervene in order to reform his law according to the times and circumstances.⁶⁶ In this way the Law no longer appears as a fixed and immutable entity, a substance, but as a process, a divine action in the world. While Judaism seems, in Tertullian's eyes, to regard the Law as a hypostasis, on the contrary he claims that it is the legislative process of God, which is implemented through his intervention in history, a process that in its incessant dynamism is essentially “critical” of all human institutions, including the religious ones. From this approach derives a change of the religious field no less radical than that of the pagan culture seen above, with a consequent reshaping of its components. For example, in Tertullian's eyes the symbolic value of circumcision as a sign of election undergoes a transvaluation: it remains a mark, though no longer of a man's proud belonging to God, but of penitence and punishment. This is a radical change of perspective: while within the Judaic religious system that Tertullian is attacking circumcision is a pledge of salvation because it guarantees one's belonging to the people of the Alliance, now it has become a mark of exclusion, the brand that condemns the Israelites to stay out of the holy city.⁶⁷ It is as if the space of the relationship between God and man had been redefined: a reversal of the poles where inside becomes outside, and vice versa.

The homology between these two redefinitions brought about by Tertullian on the one hand in the field of the Hellenistic-Roman culture and on the other hand in the field of Judaism is well recognized in c.7 of *Adversus Iudaeos*, where the theme of the ecumenical spread of Christianity is discussed as an element that simultaneously discards both the particularistic closure of the Jewish Law and the pretension to universal domination of the Roman Empire. He contrasts the Jewish Law, reserved to one nation, with the ecumenical openness and spread of the Christian faith, which is even seen as proof of its truth. The list of the many nations that attend Pentecost in *Acts* 2,9-11 is annotated by Tertullian with the far from trivial comment that among the peoples present in Jerusalem on that day and symbolically reached by the reverberation of the Spirit's outpouring on the apostles, there were also some from remote and almost unknown regions and islands that didn't belong then (and don't belong now) to the Roman Empire. To confirm this point, he does not

⁶³ TERTULLIAN, *Adversus Iudaeos*, 1,3.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem* 2,3-7.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem* 2,7.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem* 2,10: «Nec adimamus hanc dei potestatem pro temporum condicione legis praecepta reformantem in hominis salutem».

⁶⁷ *Ibidem* 3,3-4.6: «Nam providens deus, quod hanc circumcisionem in signum non in salutem esset daturus populo Israeli, idcirco filium Moysi ducis futuri instigat circumcidi [...]. Dari enim habebat circumcisio, sed in signum unde Israel in novissimo tempore dinosci haberet, quando secundum sua merita in sanctam civitatem ingredi prohiberetur [...]. Haec igitur dei providentia fuit, dandi circumcisionem in signum unde dinosci possent, cum adveniret tempus cum pro meritis suis supradictis in Hierusalem admitti prohiberentur [...]».

hesitate to add to the list of peoples cited in the text of Acts another series of nations, which brings us far beyond the boundaries of *Romanitas*,⁶⁸ to conclude with pride: «in quibus omnibus locis Christi nomen, qui iam venit, regnat».⁶⁹ Extolling Christ's ecumenical power thus works at the same time as proof of his truth and as a factor of criticism for both the political and religious fields with which Christianity has a confrontation, the particularistic one of the Jewish nation and the falsely universalistic one of the Roman empire.

2.3. *The inverted perspective: who besieges who?*

The public character of the Christian testimony is fundamental to Tertullian, who strongly emphasizes it from the very opening of the *Apologeticum*, where he states that anti-Christian hatred is indissolubly linked to ignorance of Christianity: «all, who formerly hated [it] because they were ignorant of the nature of what they hated, at once cease to hate as soon as they cease to be ignorant».⁷⁰ The conversion of pagans to Christianity, which he presents as logical consequence of the knowledge that they have acquired, is also adduced as evidence of the truth and goodness of the Christian faith. Of course, he realizes that such an affirmation may seem very questionable on the basis of the fact that there are also many people that “convert” to evil.⁷¹ but he replies that in the case of evil one cannot speak of true conversion, because whoever does evil does not publicly claim it, but rather tries to conceal it.⁷² Christians, on the contrary, openly affirm their choice of life, and it is precisely the public character of their conversion and then profession of Christian faith in daily life that confers the value of proof of the truth on their very faith. This is, in Tertullian's mind, decisive in order to prove the validity of Christianity. What guarantees the incompatibility of the profession of Christian faith with all forms of lies and evil is indeed its “public” nature, given the natural and invincible repugnance of mankind for the public ostentation of evil:

Neminem [scil: Christianum] pudet, neminem paenitet nisi plane retro non fuisset; si denotatur, gloriatur; si accusatur, non defendit; interrogatus vel ultro confitetur; damnatus gratias agit. Quid hoc mali est, quod naturalia mali non habet, timorem, pudorem, tergiversationem, paenitentiam, deplorationem?⁷³

The visibility of Christianity is therefore essential for him, and it is precisely on the basis of this visibility that the position of Christians within the public space becomes decisive: their problem is

⁶⁸ *Ibidem* 7,4: «ut iam Gaetulorum varietates et Maurorum multi fines, Hispaniarum omnes termini et Galliarum diversae nationes et Britannorum inaccessa Romanis loca Christo vero subdita et Sarmatarum et Dacorum et Germanorum et Scytharum et abditarum multarum gentium et provinciarum et insularum multarum nobis ignotarum et quae enumerare minus possumus[?]».

⁶⁹ *Ibidem* 7,5.

⁷⁰ TERTULLIAN, *Apol.* 1,6: «cum omnes, qui retro oderant, quia ignorabant, simul desinunt ignorare, cessant et odisse. Ex his fiunt Christiani». See also *Ad nationes*, I,1,1.

⁷¹ *Ibidem* 1,10: «sed non ideo - inquit - bonum praeciditur, quia multos convertit: quanti enim ad malum reformantur! Quanti transfugae in perversum!».

⁷² *Ibidem* 1,10-11: «Tamen quod vere malum est, ne ipsi quidem, quos rapit, defender pro bono audent. Omne malum aut timore aut pudore natura perfudit. Denique malefici gestiunt latere, devitant apparere [...] nolunt enim suum esse, quod malum agnoscunt».

⁷³ *Ibidem* 1,12-13. The same feature of public testimony, in Tertullian's eyes, prevents pagans from reducing Christianity to a sort of *dementia* (and thus to get rid of the problem of dealing with its instances): «Non potes dementia dicere, quod revinceris ignorare» (1,13).

in fact not being marginalized, or even excluded, from the Roman public space, thus becoming (or staying) “clandestine”.⁷⁴

For this reason, Tertullian denounces, in chapter 24 of the *Apologeticum*, the contradiction in the Roman world where in spite of the alleged religious pluralism that is said to allow everyone to follow their beliefs and practise their own cults, only Christians are denied the possibility of being themselves. Only in the case of the Christians, in fact, religion becomes a reason to be excluded from *Romanitas*:

Sed nos soli arcemur a religionis proprietate. Laedimus Romanos nec Romani habemur, qui non Romanorum deum colimus. Bene quod omnium deus est, cuius, velimus ac nolimus, omnes sumus. Sed apud vos quodvis colere ius est praeter deum verum, quasi non hic magis omnium sit deus, cuius omnes sumus.⁷⁵

How should Christians react to this threat of marginalization, which risks to deprive them of such an important dimension of their religious experience as is its public manifestation? According to Tertullian, they can do it in two ways: firstly, acting and talking as if - despite hostility and persecution - they were not on the fringe but instead at the centre of political space and, so to speak, close to the heart of the imperial power. That is why in chapter 30 we see him claiming that Christians do for the emperors much more than any other Roman citizen, because they pray to the true God for the imperial *salus*; and the emperors, Tertullian significantly adds, know that very well.⁷⁶ The emperors – whose soul is, as everyone else’s, *naturaliter Christiana* – know who the true God is and they also know that it is appropriate for them to be second to God in order to be first as regards all others, because subordination to the true God confers on the imperial figure a different order of magnitude: «magnus est quia minor caelo» (30,3). What they have yet to understand is how Christians may be precious to them, as they are the only worthy intercessors with the true God.

Secondly, the task the Christian apologist assumes in person, on behalf of all his brothers in faith, is once again that of overthrowing the standpoint from which his opponents, and perhaps his fellow believers too, are used to seeing the relationship between the Christian community and the outside world, by presenting them instead the picture of a paganism “under siege” by an irresistibly growing Christianity. The theme of the *obsessa civitas* is prominent from the beginnings of the *Apologeticum*,⁷⁷ and is further reiterated in the book, with the remarkable addition of Tertullian's

⁷⁴ It is interesting to note, from this point of view, the incidence of this main Tertullian's concern in dealing with the theme of prayer: in the second part of his *De oratione*, drawing up a sort of discipline of the Christian prayer he also poses the problem of prayer times and observes: «De temporibus orationis nihil omnino praescriptum est, nisi plane omni in tempore et loco orare. Sed quomodo omni loco, cum prohibemur in publico?» (24,1). Being forbidden from praying in public seems to be a serious obstacle to the correct and complete development of Christian prayers: for this reason, Tertullian explains that yes, *omni loco* must be understood with discretion taking opportunity into account, but/ the Apostles had no qualms about praying in jail, where they could be heard by prison wardens, and Paul «in navi coram omnibus eucharistiam fecit» (*ibid.*).

⁷⁵ TERTULLIAN, *Apol.* 24,9-10.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem* 30,1-2: «Nos enim pro salute imperatorum deum invocamus aeternum, deum verum, deum vivum, quem et ipsi imperatores propitium sibi praeter ceteros malunt. Sciunt, quis illis dedit imperium; sciunt, qua homines, quis et animam; sentiunt eum esse deum solum, in cuius solius potestate sint, a quo sint secundi, post quem primi, ante omnes et super omnes deos. Quidni? Cum super omnes homines, qui utique vivunt et mortuis antistant. [2] Recogitant quousque vires imperii sui valeant, et ita deum intellegunt; adversus quem valere non possunt, per eum valere se cognoscunt».

⁷⁷ *Ibidem* 1,7: «Obsessam vociferantur civitatem; in agris, in castellis, in insulis Christianos; omnem sexum, aetatem, condicionem, etiam dignitatem transgredi ad hoc nomen quasi detrimento maerent». See also *Nat.* I, 1,2: «Adeo quotidie adolescentem numerum Christianorum ingemitis; obsessam vociferamini civitatem, in agris, in castellis, in insulis Christianos; omnem sexum, omnem aetatem, omnem denique dignitatem transgredi a vobis quasi detrimento doletis».

exclusion of all sorts of open rebellion by the Christians (a hypothesis that their alleged exponential growth would in theory make plausible), even in the face of repeated violence from the pagans:

Si enim et hostes exsertos, non tantum vindices occultos agere vellemus, deesset nobis vis numerorum et copiarum? [...] Hesterni sumus, et orbem iam et vestra omnia implevimus, urbes insulas castella municipia conciliabula, castra ipsa tribus decurias palatium senatum forum. Sola vobis reliquimus templa! Possumus dinumerare exercitus vestros: unius provinciae plures erimus!⁷⁸

What Tertullian means is that there are so many Christians in the Roman empire that, if they wanted, they might rebel and prevail over the pagans, but in fact they have absolutely no intention of doing so. Another hypothesis, theoretically conceivable and politically not less scary than the imaginary rebellion of Christians, would be that of their secession, but even that possibility is mentioned by the apologist only to be categorically excluded. What matters in Tertullian's eyes is, in fact, not the practical feasibility of such a hypothesis, obviously unrealistic, but its symbolic power: if the Christians were to retreat to some remote place in the world (where then?), the pagans would be crushed by the dread of their own solitude, for the Empire would be half-empty:

Potuimus et inermes nec rebelles, sed tantummodo discordes, solius divortii invidia adversus vos dimicasse. Si enim tanta vis hominum in aliquem orbis remoti sinum abruptissemus a vobis, suffudisset utique dominationem vestram tot qualiumcumque civium amissio, immo etiam et ipsa destitutions punisset. Procul dubio expavissetis ad solitudinem vestram, ad silentium rerum et stuporem quendam quasi mortui orbis: quaesissetis, quibus imperaretis; plures hostes quam cives vobis remansissent.⁷⁹

It would be useless to look for confirmations or to discuss numbers and percentages about this largely imaginary demography. What matters is undeappreciating the symbolic impact of this representation, as has been said.⁸⁰ The will to “keep the field”, flaunting (and to some extent boasting of) a pervasive and widespread diffusion of Christians in the Roman empire to argue that Christianity is now central to political space, goes hand in hand, in Tertullian, with the admonition, aimed, *at intra*, to his fellow Christians to be always aware that from the world, from this world, they cannot escape and that consequently one can never ignore the problem of the relationship with the pagans:

Nam et ethnicus homo adversarius noster est, incedens in eadem via vitae communis. Ceterum oportebat nos de mundo exire, si cum illis conversari non liceret.⁸¹

⁷⁸ *Ibidem* 37,4-5. We find a similar statement, reassuring and threatening at the same time, about the alleged majority power of Christians which however, thanks to *disciplina patientiae divinae*, does not become a problem of public order, in *Ad Scapulam*, 2,10: «Et utique ex disciplina patientiae divinae agere nos, satis manifestum esse vobis potest, cum tanta hominum multitudo, pars paene maior civitatis cuiusque, in silentio et modestia agimus, singuli forte noti magis quam omnes, nec aliunde noscibiles quam de emendatione vitiorum pristinorum». The reference to the universal spread of Christianity appears several times in Tertullian's work, for example in *Adversus Marcionem* III, 20,2 («Aspice universas nationes de voragine erroris humani exinde emergentes ad deum creatorem, ad deum Christum») or in *De fuga in persecutione*, 12,11 (where he speaks, concerning the Christian people, of «tantae multitudinis nemini ignotae»).

⁷⁹ TERTULLIAN, *Apol.* 37,6-7.

⁸⁰ This is a subject on which historians, sociologists and social psychologists can profitably collaborate, because the description by Tertullian of the Roman world “full of Christians” reminds us very closely of certain distorted (and sometimes manipulated) perceptions present in contemporary public opinion that are well known to scholars of social sciences (for example, think of the perception that overstates the percentage of foreigners present in a certain society or the frequency of certain crimes that are particularly alarming).

⁸¹ TERTULLIAN, *De anima*, 35,2.

Against this background of fundamental acceptance of contact with the pagans, some exclamations of impatience, such as that which comes from the heart of Tertullian himself in a passage of *De spectaculis*: «Utinam ne in saeculo quidem simul cum illis moraremur!»,⁸² should on no account be taken as a rejection of the task of living in the world alongside the pagans, but rather as an aspiration to that paradoxical detachment from worldly matters which is the mark of Christian existence outlined by Paul in 1 Cor 7 29-31.

Ad extra, namely to the pagans and especially to the Roman authorities, Tertullian wants to send the message that they cannot extend and radicalize the persecution policy against Christians since the eradication of Christianity from society has now become unfeasible, not only (and perhaps, we would say, not so much) for numerical reasons, but also because of the social importance that it has acquired. Addressing Scapula, proconsul of Africa who in 212 promoted anti-Christian measures, Tertullian cites the example of another magistrate, Arrius Antoninus, persecutor of Christians in the province of Asia, who, faced with the great number of the faithful standing before his court, after having sentenced to death a few of them, had to surrender, and, displeased and discouraged, sent away the others, exclaiming: «O miserable men, if you wish to die, you have precipices or nooses!». ⁸³ The apologist's comment is that if also the Christians of Africa *en masse* decided to denounce themselves, not even Scapula could face such a protest. If he tried to condemn them all, he would not have enough force to succeed, and above all, he would have to sentence a lot of Carthaginians who count, *vir* and *matronae* belonging to its own *ordo*, the *principales personae* of the city.⁸⁴

In the mind of the best Tertullian, a Christian can never escape the distress of a permanent conflict inherent in the daily relationship with “the other”; however, if this discomfort does not turn into resentment or stiffen in an attitude of mere defense, but opens up to the difficult path of *krisis*, it results in a vital factor of growth in Christian self-consciousness and missionary thrust.

⁸² TERTULLIAN, *De spectaculis* 15,8.

⁸³ TERTULLIAN, *Ad Scapulam*, 5,1.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 5,2: «Hoc si placuerit et hic fieri, quid facies de tantis milibus hominum, tot viris ac feminis, omnis sexus, omnis aetatis, omnis dignitatis, offerentibus se tibi? Quantis ignibus, quantis gladiis opus erit! Quid ipsa Carthago passura est, decimata a te, cum propinquos, cum contubernales suos illic unusquisque cognouerit, cum viderit illic fortasse et tui ordinis viros et matronas, et principales quasque personas, et amicorum tuorum vel propinquos vel amicos?».