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# Cornerstone Forum

*A Conversation on Religious Freedom and Its Social Implications*

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## Introducing Tertullian

Miles Windsor

*Director of Strategic Campaigns, International Strategies, at the Religious Freedom Institute*

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On 5<sup>th</sup> February 2025, at the *International Religious Freedom Summit* in Washington D.C., I was in a hall packed with activists, academics, legal practitioners, civil servants, diplomats, and politicians from all around the world with an interest in the cause of religious freedom. This sizable crowd had gathered to hear a keynote address to the conference by the newly inaugurated Vice President of the United States, J. D. Vance. The speech was highly anticipated and closely followed not only because of the status of the man speaking but also because the political posture of Vance and the wider Trump Administration had created ambiguity about what the position of the US Government would be towards the prioritisation of religious freedom in US foreign policy. Strikingly, in his speech, Vance, a committed Catholic, referenced the writings of a 3<sup>rd</sup> Century theologian and apologist, Tertullian of Carthage, as he set out the reasons why religious freedom should matter to governments and their citizens today. He said:

*Reacting to the persecution of his fellow Christians in the 3rd Century, the early Church Father, Tertullian of Carthage, published an open letter to the Roman consul. In it he advocated the freedom to practice one’s faith according to his or her conscience, and I’m quoting, “it is only just, and a privilege inherent in human nature, that every person should be able to worship according to his own convictions. The religious practice of one person neither harms nor helps another. It is not part of religion to coerce religious practice for it is by choice not coercion that we should be led to religion.” Now perhaps unsurprisingly, it was the same Church Father who is credited with first coining the phrase religious liberty.[1]*

Regardless of one’s opinions about Vice President Vance, or the Trump Administration and its policies, it is noteworthy that he drew from the opinions of a figure from an ancient epoch as a foundation for the wholehearted commitment of the most powerful nation in the world to “more fully secure religious liberty for all people of faith” and to “better protect the dignity of all peoples as

well as the rights of all believers to practice their faith in accordance with the dictates of their conscience.”

Whilst article eighteen of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) makes religious freedom a fundamental human right,[2] in a post-Christian West, the concept of religious freedom is contested. Some use the banner of religious freedom as a cover for protecting conservative Christian values. Others use it as a platform to pursue freedom *from* religion. Internationally, some view it with deep suspicion as a weapon of cultural imperialism, while others view it as a protection against that imperialism. Some say it is an incongruous cause, impertinent at a time when religions should be further squeezed out of public life and discouraged in private life. Many of us understand religious freedom as essential to human flourishing – an inalienable right which, when denied, has serious implications not only for humanitarian conditions, but also the stability, security and prosperity of societies. Regardless, the rhetoric of Tertullian continues to be quoted and misquoted after nearly two thousand years as a basis for Christian assumptions about persecution and religious freedom. It is worthwhile, in such a context, to investigate what Tertullian actually wrote and analyse the extent to which there are parallels in the experiences of and responses to persecution in the modern era, and whether his own principles and responses can be applied today.

I've primarily been drawing upon Tertullian's works the *Apologeticus* and *Ad Scapulam*, but will also reference additional early sources, including the account of the martyrdoms of Perpetua and Felicitas, and the writings of Bishop Cyprian of Carthage, Marcus Minucius Felix, Clement of Alexandria, and Tacitus, along with academic texts and other sources from the modern era.

So, who was Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus? Born to Pagan parents in the city of Carthage on the North African coast around 155-160AD, Tertullian was a lawyer, polemicist, and prominent Christian theologian of the Early Church. He lived under the imperial reigns of Septimius Severus (193–211) and Antoninus Caracalla (211–17). Carthage, at that time, was second only to Rome as a centre of culture and education in the West. Tertullian was well-educated and it is asserted by a few sources that he travelled to Rome to continue his studies probably in his late teens or early 20s. It is suggested that it is in Rome where he developed an interest in Christianity, though he converted only on his return to Carthage.[3]

Whilst little biographical information is known with certainty, the influence of his thinking and writings cannot be overstated. Tertullian was “a masterful Latin stylist who effortlessly commanded the tools of a skilled rhetorician”[4] and his abilities have contributed to his enduring legacy.

Historic Christianity is much indebted to Tertullian, who provided us with the fundamental articulation of the doctrines of the Trinity, of Christology, of anthropology; and of Christian practice such as baptism, prayer, and righteous suffering in the face of persecution.[5]

Tertullian's continuing influence is all the more remarkable given the criticism he received from the Church in Rome in the centuries that followed his life as a result of his adherence in a later period of his life to a movement called Montanism. Montanism, self-styled as 'the New Prophecy', emerged in the mid-2nd Century from Asia Minor and quickly gained a following in many of the cities throughout the Roman Empire. Montanism took a more disciplined and ascetic approach to Christian ethics and ecclesiology. Whilst now considered theologically orthodox, Montanism made unusual claims relating to its prophetic authority. Montanism's claim was that the Holy Spirit was only fully revealed through the prophesies of a 'prophet' called Montanus and two 'prophetesses' named Priscilla and Maximilla. Unlike other patristic writers, Tertullian was not declared a saint by the Church and this is attributed to opposition to his Montanist beliefs. His writings were condemned by a text known as the Gelasian Decree, which was produced between 519 and 553 AD.[6] For all the controversy and hostility around Tertullian, his enduring influence is unquestionable.

[1] *Keynote by Vice President JD Vance*, with Vice President J. D. Vance, IRF Summit 2025, Washington DC, n.d., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qS0jsEpIc9k>.

[2] 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights', *United Nations*, n.d., <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

[3] Robert L Wilken, 'Tertullian, Christian Theologian', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 3 January 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tertullian>; Eric Rebillard, 'Tertullian', in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, <https://oxfordre.com/classics/classics/abstract/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-6301?d=%2F10.1093%2Facrefo%2F9780199381135.001.0001%2Facrefo-9780199381135-e-6301&p=emailAGb2mkDaDPRDI>.

[4] Robert Louis Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom* (Yale University Press, 2019), 10.

[5] D. H. Williams, 'Tertullian (Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus) (c.155–c.225)', in *The Student's Companion to the Theologians* (n.d.), 254.

[6] Williams, 'Tertullian (Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus) (c.155–c.225)', 257.

**Miles Windsor** serves as Director of Strategic Campaigns, International Strategies, at the Religious Freedom Institute. The article series is based on a paper that Windsor submitted for his Masters of Religion (MRel) programme in Middle East and North Africa Studies, with the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS Lebanon) in Beirut entitled "Analysis of and Applications from the Writings of Tertullian about Persecution for Today." The original paper focused on the writings of Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus (Tertullian of Carthage), identifying parallels between historic and contemporary persecution experiences and responses, with analysis.



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**Religious Freedom Institute**  
2011 Pennsylvania Ave. NW | Suite 300  
Washington, D.C. 20006  
202.838.7734 | [rfi.org](https://rfi.org)