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The Tertullian Fallacy

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This is the fifth in a seven-part article series based on a paper the author submitted for a Masters of Religion (MRel) programme in Middle East and North Africa Studies with the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut entitled "Analysis of and Applications from the Writings of Tertullian about Persecution for Today."

Few phrases from the early Church have travelled as far or been repeated as confidently as the claim that persecution strengthens and grows the Church. It is often summarised in that stirring maxim: *"the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."* The line is commonly quoted as though it were an iron law of history: wherever Christians are persecuted, the Church inevitably grows stronger. Yet the origins of this idea lie in a far more nuanced argument made by the North African apologist Tertullian. When read carefully and in context, Tertullian's words challenge the simplistic assumptions often attached to them today.

One argument that Tertullian offers in both his Apology and his address to Scapula asserts that the repression and murder of Christians is futile, for it will only serve to attract more converts to the Church. His affirmations, which are delivered in the midst of the crescendos of his works with powerful flourish, on the one hand might be perceived as an effort to persuade a more tolerant policy towards Christians and on the other serve as a defiant note of victory. Perhaps they are written for both purposes. In the Apology, he writes,

But go zealously on, good presidents, you will stand higher with the people if you sacrifice the Christians at their wish, kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust; your injustice is the proof that we are innocent... Nor does your cruelty, however exquisite, avail you; it is rather a temptation to us [attraction to outsiders]. The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed... For who that contemplates it, is not excited to inquire what is at the bottom of it? Who, after inquiry, does not embrace our doctrines? And when he embraces them, desires not to suffer that he may become partaker of

the fulness of God's grace, that he may obtain from God complete forgiveness, by giving in exchange his blood?
[1]

Tertullian makes the same argument in his address to Scapula, stating that in spite of his efforts, "... this sect shall remain, reared into a more stately and stronger building by what you think will overthrow it." Again, he argues that, "every one beholding such wonderful endurance, becomes perplex in his mind, and then is led eagerly to inquire what Christianity is; and on his finding out, he follows THE TRUTH." [2]

The phrase, "the blood of Christians is seed" is often mistranslated with embellishment as "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." It has, in more recent history, been adopted, without context, as a Christian maxim proclaimed as something closer to scientific fact – *where Christians are persecuted, the Church multiplies.* [3]

It is extraordinary to consider the variety of ways in which the experiences and attitudes of persecuted Christians which we find in the writings of Tertullian correlate and hold relevance and wisdom for the modern era. However, the *Tertullian Fallacy* – this decontextualised, literal interpretation of a mistranslated passage of *the Apology* – simply, and tragically, does not bear scrutiny. An article for *Christianity Today* highlighted a study by missiologist Justin Long who compared *Pew Research* data on persecution with *Operation World* data on Church growth. [4] The research established that "Church growth is 'not strongly' correlated with either governmental or societal persecution. However, Christianity 'tends loosely' to change more rapidly (grow or shrink) when governmental restriction is high, and stays relatively stable when such pressure is low." Beyond the evident issues of historic facts, there are several problems that result from *the Tertullian Fallacy*.

Firstly, using this phrase in reference to current instances of persecution risks glamorising the sufferings of Christian brothers and sisters, often from the safe distance of more comfortable, persecution-free contexts. *Oh how scintillating is the suffering of Christians who stand defiant in the face of persecution thereby fertilising the ground for church growth!* There is certainly a spiritual glory in suffering for the name of Christ, and therein sharing somehow in Christ's sufferings (Romans 8:17). I can sympathise with the instinct, particularly amongst those who feel incapable of doing anything to help, to lean on a hope that the sufferings of our spiritual kinfolk are not in vain but rather defy the demonic intentions of their authors by resulting in the salvation of many others. However, we must resist this easy comfort. It is problematic and perverse that people on far-off, comfortable shores should celebrate Christian mistreatment and persecution based on the misplaced expectation that it will certainly result in waves of glorious conversions.

The second issue with the Tertullian Fallacy, related to the first, is that it brings into question whether Christians should concern themselves with the circumstances of their persecuted brothers and sisters and defend them in their sufferings. It ascribes to the evil of persecution the power only

the Gospel of Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit possess. In a more biblical reference to seed (the Parable of the Sower), Jesus explains that the seed that is sown and that may develop into mature Faith is in fact the Word of God. It can also lead Christians, living with the benefits of religious freedom, to question whether that freedom is, in some way, a cause of Church decline and a form of divine judgement. In a journal article which highlights several examples in which persecution did not lead to Church generation, Ron Boyd-MacMillian, a pre-eminent expert, author and veteran campaigner for persecuted Christians recounts a story which is relevant and striking.

To every visitor, Samuel Lamb [a Chinese house church leader] would unfailingly trot out his consistent mantra: "Persecution promotes growth." Then he would tell us that he was praying for his Western visitors that they would "have more persecution in order to have more growth." Many pastors who visited him returned hanging their heads. One said to me, "How do we generate more persecution in the United States so our churches stop emptying out?" and added, more poignantly, "God must have given up on us." [5]

I emphatically do not believe that Tertullian wrote with the expectation that this phrase would be adapted and adopted in the universal and absolute way that it has in the modern era. In context, his point is that witnesses to the evil injustices committed against Christians are liable to investigate the Faith, and in so doing are likely to become Christians, thereby expanding the Church and undermining the efforts of the persecutors. In his time and place it is likely that this is what he could observe taking place. It is certainly the case that in many circumstances persecution has, and continues to, lead to Church growth. The phenomenon he describes has been witnessed in places like Iran where the Church has grown significantly in the decades since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, which ushered in a regime that has violently repressed Christians. God can and does demonstrate His power of salvation and expose the weakness of tyrants through the work of the Spirit. This is not a work that should be ascribed to the tyrants or their wicked deeds. It does not happen in every case, even the North African Church that was growing with such promise when Tertullian was writing was all but eradicated as a result of successive persecutions and internecine Church intolerance.

The maxim should be appreciated in its context – a bold declaration of spiritual victory over the Roman persecutors and an assertion that, at that time and in that context, God was working to advance His Church in spite of (humanly speaking) the most powerful threats, drawing people to Him through the witness of faithful Christians in the face of the most disgraceful injustices. And today, we can certainly rejoice while mourning – that we have a sure and certain hope in the ultimate victory of Believers who, though oppressed, mistreated, and struck down, will be raised up in Eternity and presented with the victor's crown, as the God of the Universe wipes away their tears.

[1] Tertullian, *The Apology*, 83.

[2] Tertullian, *The Address of Q. Sept. Tertullian to Scapula Tertullus, Proconsul of Africa*.

- [3] Nicholas LaBanca, 'Blood of the Martyrs Is Still Seed for the Church', *Ascension Press Media*, 17 September 2018, <https://media.ascensionpress.com/2018/09/17/blood-of-the-martyrs-is-still-seed-for-the-church/>.
- [4] Morgan Lee, 'Sorry, Tertullian', *ChristianityToday.Com*, 4 December 2014, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/december/sorry-tertullian.html>.
- [5] Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, 'Does Persecution Always Bring Growth?', *International Journal on Religious Freedom (IJRF)* 12, no. 1/2 (2019): 181–92.

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