

THE MUTABILITY OF GOD: TERTULLIAN TO LACTANTIUS

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NO CONCEPTION of God has more deeply embedded itself in the Western theological tradition than that of Augustine, with its accompanying insistence on divine immutability. Because of the predominance in Augustine of the Neoplatonic understanding of God, and because of Augustine's influence in medieval theology, God's immutability continues to be strongly asserted in Catholic theology. Nevertheless, some contemporary theologians see problems when they compare the Augustinian-Thomistic understanding of God with that of the biblical authors.¹ The Scriptures often insist on God's changeable and dramatic emotional involvement in the affairs of His people. At times He repents His former deed. He becomes angry and visits Israel with wrathful judgment. He also loves tenderly and, like a mother, forgives His wayward children. He scorns burnt offerings and He hardens hearts. While theologians have traditionally argued that such passages are not to be taken literally, contemporary authors are more reluctant to move away from the rather obvious sense of these texts.

In discussing the question of God's nature, contemporary theologians usually pay very little attention to the history of the doctrine of God, especially in its pre-Augustinian phase. In his *Systematic Theology*, for example, Tillich develops a rational understanding of God and only mentions Tertullian once in a footnote.² Charles Hartshorne, on the other hand, discusses the early Christian philosophical and theological tradition, but does so inaccurately. His belief that classical theologians generally shared an abstract logical position called "monopolar theism," and therefore could not allow for divine mutability, is not adequately informed by history.³

¹ For a discussion of immutability in Barth, see E. P. Meijering, *God Being History: Studies in Patristic Philosophy* (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1975) 147-56; writers such as J. Moltmann and H. Berkhof are also discussed. From the Thomist side, see W. Norris Clarke, S.J., "A New Look at the Immutability of God," in Robert J. Roth, S.J., ed., *God Knowable and Unknowable* (New York: Fordham University, 1973) 43-72; Walter Stokes, S.J., "Is God Really Related to This World?" *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 39 (1965) 145-51; "Freedom as Perfection: Whitehead, Thomas, and Augustine," *ibid.* 36 (1962) 134-42.

² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951) 151, n. 8. He is also mentioned in passing in 2, 91.

³ A good example of this is his attempt to classify the theistic doctrines of the past through various logical schemes which he constructs. He relies heavily on abstract logic and very little on historical investigation. See especially the introduction to *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1953).

My intention is to show that the concern which contemporary authors have about immutability was felt by some Western writers before Augustine. Early Christian thinkers do not generally deny immutability, but at the same time do not always feel that it should be held in the absolute monopolar sense. The best example of this apparent, at least partial rejection of absolute immutability is Tertullian. Novatian, Arnobius, and Lactantius respond to the problem each in his own way, showing quite clearly that he does not think in either monopolar or dipolar terms. In point of fact, divine mutability is asserted in some instances, although immutability is also upheld.

TERTULLIAN

Tertullian "is the most important and original ecclesiastical author in Latin" except for Augustine.⁴ He is also the first Christian theologian to be strongly influenced by later Roman Stoicism in comparison to the varieties of Platonism in which theology was usually grounded.⁵ Much of his Trinitarian and Christological work represents a lasting contribution to the development of Christian doctrine.⁶ Although he has been often and unfairly maligned as an antiphilosophical fideist,⁷ he is the shining light of Christian theology in the West before Augustine.

Like the other early Christian theologians, Tertullian holds that God is immutable. There are aspects of the divine character which remain unchanged, because God is eternal. In his treatise against Hermogenes, who held that matter is eternal, Tertullian argued as follows: Hermogenes holds that matter is eternal; but the attribute of eternity belongs to God alone, because it is essentially a divine property; if matter were eternal, it would be God.

But God must be One, because that is God which is supreme (*summum*); but nothing can be supreme save that which is unique (*unicum*); but nothing can be unique if something can be put on a level with it; but matter will be put on a level with God, when it is authoritatively declared to be eternal.⁸

⁴ J. Quasten, *Patrology 2* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1950), 247.

⁵ R. A. Norris, *God and World in Early Christian Theology* (London: Black, 1967) 99.

⁶ A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965) 140 f.

⁷ See Robert H. Ayers, "Tertullian's Paradox," *Expository Times* 87 (1976) 308-11.

⁸ 4, 6 (CCL 1, 400-401; tr. J. H. Waszink, ACW 24, 32); see also *Ad nationes* 2, 3. Waszink schematizes Tertullian's argument in the following way (110): 1.1. God=supreme; 2. supreme=unique; 3. Therefore God is unique (one). 2.1. unique=that to which nothing is equal; 2. God is unique; 3. Therefore nothing is equal to God. 3.1. Matter, if it is eternal, is equal to God; 2. Nothing is equal to God (=1.3); 3. Therefore matter is not eternal. Tertullien gives this proof only in this particular treatise. See René Braun, "*Deus christianorum*": *Recherches sur le vocabulaire doctrinal de Tertullien* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962) 42. For all of my references, the pages are the same in the second edition of this work (1977).

Further on in the treatise, Tertullian argues that immutability is a property of eternity, and therefore of God, since mutability and temporality belong observably to matter. He says that "what is eternal does not change; obviously it would lose what it had been by becoming by the change what it was not, if it were not eternal."⁹ This passage implies that the type of mutability which renders matter temporal is not simply change of any sort, but loss. Tertullian may have used the term *inde-mutabilis* of God in a precise sense to indicate that a particular type of immutability, that is, incapacity to become less, belongs to the eternal.¹⁰

Eternity cannot belong to anything which changes for the worse.

But then change (*demutatione* [= change for the worse]) has been admitted by matter, and if this is so, it has lost its condition (*status*) of eternity; it has, in short, died its natural death (*mortua est denique sua forma*). But eternity cannot be lost because, unless it cannot be lost, it is not eternity.¹¹

Tertullian concludes by saying: "Therefore it is incapable of change for the worse (*demutatione*), because if it is eternity it can be changed for the worse (*demutari*) in no way."

Tertullian's use of the term *demutatio*, indicating a change which involves loss, and the context of the argument itself, show that eternity cannot involve loss. Eternity and the incapacity to become less go together. Matter decays and is therefore not eternal, and because of his earlier argument (not eternal = not divine) it is not divine.¹²

Another passage in Tertullian carries the same implication. The type of change which involves loss is impossible for God. God exists in "unimpaired integrity and ought not to be diminished (*minui*) or suspended (*intercipi*) or destroyed (*corrumpi*). Well, then, also His happiness (*felicitas*) would disappear if He ever suffered loss (*si quid patitur*)."¹³

If God as eternal cannot become less, neither can He become more. He is by definition the supreme, that *magnum summum*, existing in eternity.¹⁴ Against Marcion's second God of goodness, for whom he claims superiority to the Creator of the Old Testament, Tertullian must once again argue the oneness of God and that the divine attributes cannot be shared. "God is not if He is not one."¹⁵ The definition of God then follows: "God is the great supreme (*summum magnum*) existing in eternity, unborn (*innatum*), unmade (*infectum*), without beginning and without

⁹ 12, 3 (Waszink 42).

¹⁰ See 2, 2; 12, 1; 12, 3; Braun 57.

¹¹ 12, 4.

¹² Section 34 is a good summary.

¹³ *Ad nat.* 2, 6.

¹⁴ *Adv. Marc.* 1, 3, 2; God as *magnum summum* is an original description; cf. Braun 43.

¹⁵ *Adv. Marc.* 1, 3.

end (*sine initio, sine fine*)."¹⁶ In this last passage we see again the importance which the attribute of eternity has for Tertullian. To introduce a second God, Marcion must ascribe to Him the property of eternity. But eternity can only belong to the supreme being, who, because He is the supreme being, is unique. And the unique is by definition one.

Since God is not temporal, neither is He mutable. Tertullian says: "Eternity has no time. It is itself all time: it acts; it cannot then suffer (*Quod facit, pati non potest*)."¹⁷ The type of immutability which eternity implies in this passage is the incapacity to be affected by time, which is the third type of immutability that is ascribed to God. He is incapable of becoming less, because only matter can decay. He cannot become more, because He is already *summum magnum*. Neither can He be affected by that which is temporal.

Divine Mutability

It seems by this time that all possible mutability in God has been ruled out by Tertullian. However, one attribute which he and other Christian theologians had to defend against Marcion was the goodness of the Creator.¹⁸ It is his delineation of this aspect of God's character in relation to the world which leads directly to one of his main arguments for God's mutability.

The *Adversus Marcionem* contains Tertullian's most important discussion of goodness as a divine attribute.¹⁹ This is the main attribute of Marcion's God and this distinguishes him from the God of the Old Testament. Tertullian attempts to discover, he says, "certain rules for examining God's goodness." This is the first: "All things in God should be natural and ingenerate (*ingenita*), in order that they may be eternal just like God's own state." If they naturally belong to God, the attributes will not be "accounted casual and extraneous, and thereby temporal and lacking eternity." Since God is eternal, so ought His attributes to be. But Marcion's God is not eternally good. He becomes so by saving mankind. Therefore. . . .

The second rule is that "all properties of God ought to be as rational as they are natural." Therefore God's goodness must be reasonable to be good. The goodness of Marcion's god, however, is irrational, because he

¹⁶ See also 1, 7; 9. In *De anima* Tertullian gives nearly the same list of attributes to distinguish God from the soul (21). Here he also calls God *inconvertibilem*. This attribute directly contradicts what he says in the *De carne Christi*, as we shall see. The term *inconvertibilem* is, however, missing from one manuscript of *De anima*. See CCL 2, 814, n. 46.

¹⁷ *Adv. Marc.* 1, 8, 3.

¹⁸ For Marcion, a standard work is A. Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (2nd ed.; TU 45; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1924).

¹⁹ 1, 22 f.

proceeded to save creatures he had not previously created or known. Therefore. . . .²⁰

The third rule, implied in 1, 24, is that God's attributes must be perfect. The goodness of Marcion's god is imperfect, because it is not eternal and not rational, and also because it does not save most people. "So long, then, as you prefer your god to the Creator on the simple ground of his goodness, and since he professes to have this attribute as solely and wholly his own, he ought not to have been lacking in it to anyone." But even those whom Marcion's god saves have an imperfect goodness given to them, since only their souls are saved and not their bodies. Thus only part of the person is saved, and the more sinful of the two parts at that!²¹

But divine goodness, as Marcion presents it, lacks something else as well: in order to be good in a divine manner, God must also be able to condemn. Tertullian opens 1, 25 of the work against Marcion by stating that goodness is incompatible with deity if deity is *only* good. Marcion's God was imperturbable and listless,²² could only save and only some at that, and could not condemn at all. This type of goodness is inappropriate to God, because it is unresponsive to the changing situations of human life. Goodness like this is "neither ingenerate (*ingenitam*) nor rational nor perfect, but wrong (*improbam*) and unjust and unworthy of the very name of goodness. . . ."²³ A God good only in his dealing with mankind is not good enough to be God.

It is precisely this point which leads Tertullian to view God as mutable and passible, as someone who does indeed have personal feelings. He expresses a sentiment which is in strong agreement with some modern thinking:

For it is, furthermore, at this point quite open to discussion whether God ought to be regarded as a being of simple goodness, to the exclusion of all those other attributes (*appendicibus*), sensations (*sensibus*), and affections (*adfectibus*) which the Marcionites indeed transfer from their god to the Creator, and which we acknowledge to be worthy characteristics of the Creator too.²⁴

The sense of this passage is even stronger than the translation suggests: if any being is represented as divine without the attributes which express personal responsiveness to the world, it lacks a necessary aspect of deity and is therefore not divine.

Tertullian also argues that Marcion contradicts himself, because Marcion's god too truly *feels*. Marcion held that the good God, announced by Jesus, was a newcomer in the affairs of mankind and therefore began to have a concern for salvation which he did not have previously. He began

²⁰ 1, 23.

²¹ 1, 24.

²² 1, 25, 3.

²³ 1, 25, 1.

²⁴ 1, 25, 2.

to feel. Secondly, the fact that he wants to be known and accepted now by men means that he must have feelings of rivalry against the Creator, feelings that for Tertullian are in a certain sense even appropriate to the one God. When Marcion's god decided to entertain a concern for man's salvation after such a long time of indifference, "did he not by this very fact become susceptible of the impulse of a new volition, so as palpably to be open to all other emotions? But what volition is unaccompanied by the spur of desire? Who wishes for what he desires not?"²⁵ Concern in Marcion's god gives rise to will, and will gives rise to desire to save mankind from the rule of the Creator God. Emotions necessarily arise in him that are appropriate to the adversary relationship which this new concern for mankind creates: "anger, discord, hatred, disdain, indignation, spleen, loathing, displeasure."²⁶

Some of these very same emotions belong to the Christian God in His role as judge, which Tertullian thinks God must be if He is to be good. He must feel emotions such as offense and anger, and He must punish. God is not fully good unless He is the enemy of evil.²⁷ Judgment without punishment is irrelevant to morality and religion; one must both love and fear the Lord.²⁸ Since Marcion's god cannot feel offense and anger, and cannot judge or punish, he cannot be God.

In Book 2 of his treatise against Marcion, Tertullian explains at great length what God's goodness is. It is an eternal attribute,²⁹ and only God is good by nature.³⁰ That man is good by creation is evident especially in the freedom of the will he possesses. Although God had previous knowledge of man's fall and the power to prevent it, He withheld Himself from interfering with the liberty He bestowed, a liberty which is man's own created goodness. Since man did fall, it became necessary for God to become a judge in order to remain good.

God's justice, for Tertullian, is in one sense an eternal attribute, and in another sense one which is temporal and responsive to the situation of man's sin. It is eternal, innate, and natural just as goodness is. Goodness created the world, justice arranged it. "Do not suppose that His function as a judge must be defined as beginning when evil began, and so tarnish His justice with the cause of evil."³¹

Divine justice, however, takes on another function in the world as the result of sin. "Up to the fall of man, therefore, from the beginning God was simply good; after that He became a judge both severe and, as the Marcionites will have it, cruel."³² When sin occurred, the goodness of God

²⁵ 1, 25, 4.

²⁶ 1, 25, 6.

²⁷ 1, 26.

²⁸ 2, 13.

²⁹ 2, 3, 3.

³⁰ 2, 6.

³¹ 2, 12.

³² 2, 11.

had an adversary and His justice acquired another function, which was to direct His goodness against this adversary. The result: "The divine goodness, being interrupted in that free course whereby God was spontaneously good, is now dispensed according to the deserts of every man; it is offered to the worthy, denied to the unworthy, taken from the unthankful, and also avenged on all its enemies."³³ God is "good from His own (character), just in consequence of ours. For if man had never sinned, he would simply and solely have known God in His superlative goodness, from the attribute of His nature."³⁴ Justice is an extension of the divine goodness when it is a punishment for sin.

We have seen two instances of divine mutability in Tertullian, and they are related. Although God is eternally good and just, He becomes a judge vis à vis human sinfulness; and He begins to feel the emotions of a judge, such as offense and anger. Essentially, however, because He is eternal, He cannot become less or more, or in any basic sense be affected by time.

Although his thinking is neither acute nor systematic enough to formulate this understanding satisfactorily, Tertullian has insight into the religious and theological significance of God's mutability. In his polemical works he seems to become so involved in arguing against his opponents' theories that he does not recall immutability-mutability distinctions previously made. On the whole, he does not carefully distinguish between different types of immutability and mutability which God has. He never constructs a completely systematic understanding of God, although careful distinctions regarding mutability are clearly made, as we shall see.

Book 2, chapter 16 of the work against Marcion contains Tertullian's most fruitful discussion of divine mutability. He begins by justifying God's severity and the emotions which flow from severity: wrath, jealousy, and sternness. These are as indispensable to severity as severity is to justice. In *De testimonio animae* Tertullian argues the same point in another way. Marcionites "honor" God by absolving Him from His concern for knowing the world, and do not ascribe anger to Him. If God is angry, they say, He is passionate (*passionalis*), and that which is passionate is corruptible.³⁵ But the soul has a superior opinion. It knows God and therefore fears Him. "Whence, then, the soul's natural fear of God, if God cannot be angry? How is there any dread of Him whom nothing offends? What is feared but anger? Whence comes anger but from observing what is done?"³⁶

Adversus Marcionem 2, 16 expands upon this argument by showing how one can speak reasonably about God's feelings. Heretics think that "If God is angry and jealous and roused and grieved, He must therefore

³³ 2, 13, 1.

³⁴ *De res. carnis* 14.

³⁵ 2, 3.

³⁶ 2, 5.

be corrupted and must therefore die." They judge that the divine is like the human. They think that God must have the same passions as man, when actually the reverse is true. Tertullian tells the Marcionites: "Discriminate between the natures (*substantias*) and assign to them their respective senses, which are as diverse as their natures require, although they seem to have a community of designation."³⁷ God apparently has these feelings in the supreme way that befits His nature. One can only think analogously about God's emotions and ours, not univocally.

Tertullian continues: We are made in God's image, and this is the basis of our emotive similarity with Him: "And this, therefore, is to be deemed the likeness of God in man, that the human soul have the same emotions and sensations as God, although they are not of the same kind, differing as they do both in their conditions (*status*) and their expressions (*exitus*) according to their nature."³⁸ The major distinction drawn between God's emotions and our own is that ours are had in a corruptible manner and God's are not, since the divine essence is incorruptible. God has these emotions but in a divine manner, which is to say that He has all emotions perfectly. God possesses meekness, patience, mercy, and their parent, goodness. So also He has anger. God is affected by these particular emotions in a happy manner, however, because of His incorruptibility. He will be angry but not irritated or tempted, moved but not subverted.³⁹

The last sentence shows how Tertullian attempted to work out the necessary distinctions in the logic of divine mutability. He must show how God's emotions are different than ours, as well as the same. Further than this he did not go. He concludes chapter 16:

He must use all (His feelings) because of all (situations), as many senses as there are causes: anger because of the proud and whatever else hinders evil. So again, mercy because of the erring, and patience because of the impenitent, and pre-eminent resources because of the meritorious, and whatever is the work of good. All these feelings move Him in His own way, in which it is fitting that He should be moved (*pati*), and because of Him man is affected equally in his own way.⁴⁰

We have seen that God cannot become less or more, or be affected by time. He is eternally the same. It is obviously the case, however, that He can and must feel negative emotions to be a judge, and further, all emotions in order to be God. He does not feel them as we do, but nevertheless does feel them somehow, and therefore changes in an appropriately divine manner. This manner is not specifically or systematically defined by Tertullian, but God's feelings are to be understood by analogy with our own, analogy which is rooted in the relationship of man

³⁷ 2, 16, 4.

³⁸ 2, 16, 6.

³⁹ 2, 16, 7.

⁴⁰ 2, 16, 7.

to God as God's image. Tertullian's God is really related to the world and responsive to the peculiar situation of each person.

A major objection to divine mutability is met: the Marcionite claim that God is inconstant if He changes his past judgments.⁴¹ Tertullian argues that the mark of a good judge is to decide on the merits of the case at hand, in terms of the present moment of a person's existence. God must change His judgment depending upon the goodness or evil of persons now. No one should think of Him as completely rejecting or choosing a person for life. The capability which God has to judge and decide rationally whether to accept or reject someone is an aspect of divine providence.

Tertullian makes the same argument to affirm the invalidity of Jewish religious institutions. "Let us not annul this power which God has to reform the law's precepts answerably to the circumstances of the times, with a view to man's salvation."⁴² Jewish religious institutions are no longer a valid response to God's will, according to Tertullian, because His will has changed.

In Book 2, chapter 24 of the work against Marcion, Tertullian discusses the same type of divine mutability with regard to 1 Sam 15:11, where God "repents . . . that I have set up Saul to be king." God's repentance in this case, as with the Ninevites, has a different meaning than it does for man. It is obvious from the Greek term for repentance that sin need not be involved:

For it will have no other meaning than a simple change of a prior purpose; and this is admissible without any blame even in a man, much more in God, whose every purpose is faultless. Now in Greek the word for repentance (*metanoia*) is formed not from the confession of a sin but from a change of mind, which in God we have shown to be regulated by the occurrence of varying circumstances.

Thus for Tertullian there are three types of divine mutability. God changes to become the judge of human sinfulness; He feels various emotions which are appropriate to judging, and also those appropriate to His goodness; and His will changes in accord with the changing circumstances of history. In each case the change is caused in God by changes in the temporal world.

Tertullian's desire to include mutability in his description of God springs partially, I believe, from what he conceives as logical necessity. But his major concern is to represent theologically the personal and active God of biblical faith in His relationships with the world. While

⁴¹ 2, 23.

⁴² *Adv. Judaeos* 2.

Tertullian is not unique in having this concern, he expresses it more strongly than any other early Christian writer.⁴³

The theological implication of these passages is important. If they had been more influential, they might have paved the way for a systematic view of God which took the divine emotions more seriously than has usually been the case in the mainstream of theology.

Tertullian's "Capitulation"

A number of authors have argued that Tertullian "capitulates" to Marcion in regard to divine mutability. This opinion is based upon a passage in the second book of the treatise against Marcion and is held by M. Pohlenz,⁴⁴ R. Cantalamessa,⁴⁵ and Jean-Claude Fredouille.⁴⁶ They appeal to this passage: "Whatever attributes, therefore, you (Marcionites) require as worthy of God must be found in the Father, who is invisible and unapproachable and placid and (so to speak) the God of the philosophers, whereas those qualities which you censure as unworthy must be supposed to be in the Son."⁴⁷ The authors I have cited sense quite correctly that Tertullian is attributing passibility to the Second Person here. We shall see in *De carne Christi* how the Incarnation represents a type of divine mutability, but he probably does not have that in mind. In this passage, however, he may vacillate but he does not capitulate.

Fredouille himself admits this in effect by citing passages which occur later in the treatise in which Tertullian states "encore la légitimité de la colère divine."⁴⁸ I suspect that the authors see Tertullian's "capitulation" as a point in his favor, because they themselves see no alternative to absolute divine immutability and wish to see Tertullian as "coming around in the end."

Divine Mutability in the Incarnation

Tertullian wrote another treatise against the Marcionites specifically to take issue with their Docetism (*De carne Christi*). This was followed

⁴³ Norris (*God and World* 112) is puzzled by the fact that Tertullian accepts the "Platonized doctrine of God and creation which he had inherited from his predecessors as normative Christian teaching," but that he is troubled by God's immutability. He suggests that Tertullian did not understand or come to terms with the "philosophical presuppositions of the theology he transmits." I believe it is just as likely that Tertullian did understand the Platonic presuppositions but was more critical (at least unconsciously) of them than his predecessors and was, in effect, attempting to be more biblical than they.

⁴⁴ *Vom Zorne Gottes: Eine Studie über den Einfluss der griechischen Philosophie auf das alte Christentum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1909) 28, 42, 58.

⁴⁵ *La cristologia di Tertullian* (Paradosis 18; Fribourg: Edizioni Universitarie, 1962) 41.

⁴⁶ *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1972) 161-62.

⁴⁷ 2, 27, 6.

⁴⁸ 5, 13, 3; 5, 19, 8.

later by a work on the Incarnation directed against Praxeas (*Adversus Praxean*), a monarchian.⁴⁹ These two treatises are devoted to the refutation of opposite theories. In the first, it must be established that the Word can in some reasonable sense become man and not merely take on the appearance of a man. The distinction between the Word and the Father, and the divinity of the Word, are both taken for granted, and the full humanity of Christ is the point of contention. One of the Marcionite arguments against full humanity is that God cannot become man because He cannot change. In the work against Praxeas the humanity of Christ is taken for granted and the real distinction between the divine Persons becomes the issue. Therefore in the second treatise Tertullian must argue that the Word is truly divine and yet truly distinct from the Father. He must have all the divine attributes, including eternity and immutability.

In *De carne* Tertullian believes that he must establish the possibility of the Word's mutability to verify the fact of the Incarnation. Therefore he argues the mutability of the Word against Marcion. Later, however, he argues immutability against Praxeas. He is unsuccessful in developing a systematic viewpoint by which he can refute both opponents simultaneously.⁵⁰

The Marcionite argument is that the Incarnation is impossible: if God becomes what He was not previously, He loses what He was.⁵¹ It is necessary that something which is without end is also inconvertible, since conversion into something else puts an end to what one originally was. There can be no conversion of something which is unending.⁵²

Tertullian agrees that this is true for things in general, but nothing is equal to God. His nature is different from the condition of all other things. "If, then, the things which differ from God and from which God differs lose what they were when they are converted, what will the difference of the divinity be from everything else except that the contrary obtains, i.e., that God can be converted into all things (*omnia*) and continue as He is (*qualis est perservare*)?"⁵³ God is not equal to creatures in any other respect. Why, then, should He be their equal in changeability (*in exitu conversionis*)?⁵⁴ God can become anything He wants to become,

⁴⁹ See the discussion of the chronology of Tertullian's works in T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 30-56.

⁵⁰ *De carne* proposes mutability (*conversio*) as an explanation for the Incarnation, and *Adv. Praxean* denies it by denying the term *transfiguratio*. Although the two terms used for change do not have exactly the same sense, even in *Adv. Praxean*, he states at least once that the *conversio* of the Word in the Incarnation, for which he previously argued in *De carne*, is impossible (*Prax.* 27, 13). See Cantalamessa, *Cristologia* 72 f.

⁵¹ 3, 4.

⁵² 2, 1, 5.

⁵³ 3, 5.

⁵⁴ 3, 6.

because He is God. There is a sense in which the divine will does not obey the laws and dictates of logical possibility.⁵⁵

Tertullian's argument, then, is that the divine character is such that it can allow for change while retaining its identity. The change which did occur was the embodiment (*corporationem*) of the Word in Jesus.⁵⁶ On this basis certain Christological statements can be taken literally: God was literally crucified, God died and was buried, God rose from the dead. It is in this manner that Tertullian solves the problem of the communication of idioms.

The fact that the Docetic Marcionites deny this destroys the "indispensable dishonor of our faith."⁵⁷ The cardinal point of Christian faith in the Incarnation is that it is based upon the inept, dishonorable, and impossible fact of the death and resurrection of the Son of God. And for Tertullian this ineptitude is grounded in divine mutability.

This is a unique explanation for the change in God which the Incarnation involves. Tertullian is the first Christian theologian to fully confront the problem of reason which Christian belief in the Incarnation represents. Because of the obvious logical difficulty of his position, however, it is not surprising that he is not consistent later on. In *Adversus Praxean* he not only changes his terminology but even defends what he denied previously: the unchanging nature of the Word.⁵⁸

Tertullian again asks how one can understand the statement that the "Word became flesh."⁵⁹ Is the becoming to be understood as a *transfiguration* or as a clothing (*indutus*) with flesh? It must be a clothing that is meant. We must believe that God is unchangeable and incapable of form, since He is eternal. Transfiguration is the destruction of that which previously existed. "For whatsoever is transfigured into some other thing ceases to be that which it had been and begins to be that which it

⁵⁵ See *De carne* 3, 1: "With God, however, nothing is impossible but what He does not will." Also in *Adv. Praxean* 10, 9: "For with God, to be willing is to be able. All that He has willed, however, He has both been able to accomplish and has displayed His ability." Tertullian's understanding of God's will as active in history is unique in early Christian theology. See Norris, *God and World* 118 f., for an excellent presentation of this theme in Tertullian.

⁵⁶ 4, 1.

⁵⁷ 5.

⁵⁸ Of all the authors consulted, J. P. Mahé has the best view of the inconsistency between the two treatises. He explains the inconsistency as a clarity of expression gained by the time *Adv. Praxean* is written, and this represents an advance over the terminology of *De carne*. See his introduction to *La chair du Christ* (SC 216-17; Paris: Cerf, 1975) 150-55. *Conversio* in *De carne* means an absolutely unique change which preserves the unchanging essence of Christ. In *Adv. Praxean* Tertullian gives up the term *conversio* and explicitly rejects *transfiguratio* as an apt expression for the mutability which the Incarnation involves. He settles on the term *induere* (clothing).

⁵⁹ 27.

previously was not. God, however, neither ceases to be what He was nor can He be any other thing than what He is."⁶⁰ Therefore transfiguration into flesh is impossible.

If the Word becomes flesh by a change of substance, the unity which results would be a mixture, a *tertium quid*, neither God nor man. Tertullian utilizes the distinction of natures to argue that certain passages in the New Testament apply to the human nature, others to the divine.⁶¹ It is clear that neither the Father nor the Son as divine is capable of suffering.⁶² The Spirit of God is also impassible, even though He enabled Jesus to suffer just as He enables us to suffer, that is, in the flesh.⁶³

Tertullian has returned here to the logic of the book against Hermogenes with which we began. Apparently he was unable to reconcile the mutability of the Son with the immutability of the divine essence. This is further evidence that his tools were simply inadequate for the formulation of a systematic conception of God which could adequately express both immutability and mutability; more importantly, he was unable to synthesize carefully, I believe, because of the polemic intentions of his major works.

Admittedly, any type of incarnational mutability of God, when conceived in a realistic manner, is difficult to conceptualize even for modern theology. In any case, Tertullian has made some essential contributions to a theology of God which is able to take His personality seriously. God cannot change in the same manner in which we do, but change He must if He is to be involved in the world of change. He cannot feel as we do, but feel He must if He is to be involved in a world of persons, precisely as a person. God's goodness demands mutability if He is to be perfectly good. If He is a personal God, He must be able to respond to our needs.

Norris sees Tertullian as a theologian committed to the Middle Platonist tradition which he inherited from his predecessors, especially Justin and Irenaeus.⁶⁴ They had rendered the relationship between God and the world in the Middle Platonist terms which insisted on God's immutability. Tertullian knew this theological tradition, as well as the Scriptures. His religious and rational impulses, I believe, led him to diverge from the theology of his predecessors. God was, for him, necessarily mutable. Tertullian was possibly unconscious of the difficulties inherent in the marriage between the Platonist and scriptural understandings of God,

⁶⁰ 27, 6-7.

⁶¹ 29.

⁶² 29, 5-7.

⁶³ For Tertullian's use of *Spiritus Dei*, see Cantalamessa, *Cristologia* 50-51. The term usually refers to the Son, emphasizing His consubstantiality. Here, however, it refers to the Third Person of the Trinity. See *ibid.* 50, n. 1.

⁶⁴ *Esp.* 111-12.

and so never openly presented the conflict. This fact, along with his polemical intentions, prevented him from developing a more systematic view of God.

FROM NOVATIAN TO LACTANTIUS

Three major Latin writers discuss divine immutability after Tertullian and before Augustine: Novatian, a Roman theologian, and two Africans, Arnobius of Sicca and his pupil Lactantius. Each in his own way responds to the immutability tradition as well as to the concern to preserve the divine emotions, mainly the divine wrath.

Novatian's major dogmatic treatise is his work *De trinitate*. It "was probably written well before 250 and is the first great Latin contribution to theology to appear in Rome."⁶⁵ A portion of this work (chaps. 4-7) discusses divine immutability and God's wrath. Somewhat later Arnobius wrote an apology for Christianity (*Adversus nationes*) in which the doctrine of God's immutability is the main theological idea. Lactantius apparently disagreed strongly enough with his teacher Arnobius about immutability to write a treatise about the reality of God's wrath (*De ira Dei*).

Novatian's work on the Trinity discusses the nature and attributes of God at some length.⁶⁶ He begins by stating that the Christian doctrines of God's fatherhood, His omnipotence, and creation are required by the rule of faith (*regula fidei*).⁶⁷ God has no beginning and no end. For this reason He is always infinite (*semper immensus*) and there is nothing greater. He is always eternal, because there is nothing older. That which is without origin is preceded by none, because it is not temporal.⁶⁸

God does not change or transform Himself into other forms, lest by change He should appear to be mortal. We see here the argument against divine mutability which Tertullian answered by distinguishing the qualities of mutability and mortality. For Tertullian change does not necessarily imply mortality; for Novatian it does. "For the change (*immutatio*) implied in turning from one thing to another (*conversionis*) is comprehended as a portion (*portio*) of a certain death."⁶⁹

In the same passage Novatian gives a second argument against mutability which connects immutability to divine perfection. "Thus there is never in Him any accession (*adfectio*) or increase (*accedit*) of any part or

⁶⁵ Quasten, *Patrology* 2, 217.

⁶⁶ Chaps. 2-8.

⁶⁷ This may have been the original title of the work; see R. DeSimone, *The Treatise of Novatian the Roman Presbyter on the Trinity: A Study of the Text and the Doctrine* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1970); also his translation in FC 67 (1974); see 23, n. 1 for the title.

⁶⁸ 2.

⁶⁹ 4.

honor, lest anything should appear to have ever been wanting to His perfection." If anything increases in God, it implies that God had a beginning. If He loses anything, it indicates possible death and perishing. But that which constitutes His divinity must necessarily always exist and have no beginning and no end. God must always be the same to be God, and He is the same because He has no beginning. Novatian gives Tertullian's argument from *Hermogenes* 4, 3, which deduces God's oneness from His eternity:

And thus [because of no beginning] He is declared to be one (*unus*), having no equal. For whatever can be God must as God be of necessity the highest (*summum*). But whatever is the highest must certainly be the highest in such a sense as to be without any equal. And thus that must needs be alone (*solum*) and one on which nothing can be conferred, having no peer.⁷⁰

Further on, the argument surprisingly concludes that God is infinite rather than immutable or perfect. Novatian apparently takes infinity to be virtually the same as immutability or perfection, since the attributes all imply no beginning or end: "there cannot be two infinities, as the very nature of things dictates. And that is infinite which neither has any sort of beginning nor end." Novatian is much less clear on this point than Tertullian. He has confused the perfection, immutability, and infinity of God, because all involve lack of beginning and end to him.

Despite his defense of divine immutability, Novatian also defends the divine wrath, indignation, and even hatred in a manner reminiscent of, if not dependent upon, Tertullian.⁷¹ We are not to understand these emotions "in the sense in which they are human vices," since God is incorruptible. "For such passions as these will rightly be said to be in men and will not rightly be judged to be in God." God has these passions but is not corrupted by them. Therefore He does not have them properly (*non merito*).

It is the passible nature of man as opposed to the impassible nature of God which allows us to distinguish between the wrath of the one and of the other. These passions are rightly felt by an embodied individual. Since God is not embodied, He does not have them properly. The following chapter argues against anthropomorphic conceptions of the deity despite the biblical passages to the contrary.

It is clear that in the treatise Novatian wants to argue for divine immutability as well as divine wrath. He is unable to reconcile these two doctrines because he does not have Tertullian's sense of the analogical character of language about God and ultimately must rest his case upon God's incomprehensibility. Chapter 7 states this quite forcefully: God is

⁷⁰ 4.

⁷¹ 5.

something like us in His feelings of wrath, indignation, and hatred, but we simply do not know how He is like us, because He is incomprehensible. Neither can we speak about Him properly. "We can in some degree be conscious of Him in silence, but we cannot in discourse unfold Him as He is."⁷² God cannot be literally construed as Love or Light or Spirit or Fire, because He is greater than any description which is merely human. We can speak of God as having human passions, but these have no objective application to God's incomprehensible being.

ARNOBIUS

Arnobius departs completely from the theological attempts to justify God's emotions. His major concern is to differentiate the Christian God from the popular deities of his time, and he apparently constructed his doctrine of God along Epicurean lines.⁷³ This makes him especially interesting for our purpose, since he is the only early Christian writer to think of God in this way. The Epicurean idea of God as aloof from the concerns of the world "runs through all of *Adversus nationes*, and is really its central thought, the fountainhead of all its teaching."⁷⁴

The *Adversus nationes* militates strongly against the passionate gods and goddesses of paganism. They are much too involved in the affairs of the world to be divine. The actions and passions which the myths attribute to them are unworthy of God. When the enemies of Christianity, for instance, say that their gods are angry at Christians, do they not see that they are attributing base feelings to them? "For to be angry, what else is it than to be insane, to rave, to be urged to the lust of vengeance . . .?"⁷⁵ Thus they attribute feelings to the divine nature, and this cannot be the case.

True gods can have no anger or hold grudges. It is a sacrilege to believe that God feels despised if worship is not given. It is "childish, weak, petty, and unbecoming" for pagan gods to "be busied with the coarser matter of earth."⁷⁶ The Christian God does not need our prayers. Praying only benefits us by bringing us closer to God.⁷⁷

Arnobius often sees the same connection between feelings and corruptibility that we have previously noticed. The gods should not feel, since those who are "touched by passion live a life of suffering and are weakened by grief." They are therefore "bound by the laws of mortality."⁷⁸ Whatever is liable to suffering is corruptible "by that very capacity

⁷² 2.

⁷³ George E. McCracken, *Arnobius of Sicca: The Case against the Pagans* (ACW 7-8; Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1949) 29-30.

⁷⁴ Quasten, *Patrology* 2, 388.

⁷⁵ 1, 17.

⁷⁷ 1, 27.

⁷⁶ 1, 23.

⁷⁸ 6, 2.

of suffering,"⁷⁹ he says in reference to the soul. And "whatever is upheld by causes and things external to itself must be mortal and on the way to destruction, when anything on which it lives begins to be wanting."⁸⁰

For a summary statement, let us return to the beginning of the work:

For wherever, as the philosophers hold, there is agitation, there of necessity passion must exist. Where passion is situated, it is reasonable that mental excitement (*perturbatio*) follows. Where there is mental excitement, there grief and sorrow exist. Where grief and sorrow exist, there is already room for weakening (*imminutione*) and decay (*corruptioni*).⁸¹

The argument is repeated in almost the same form near the end of the work: feeling is being moved by another. Whatever is moved by another is capable of suffering and frailty and must therefore be corruptible. Anger is a feeling and thus it renders the angered being corruptible. "Therefore that should be called mortal which has been made subject to the emotions of anger."⁸² But God is immortal; therefore God cannot be angry.

LACTANTIUS

Lactantius thinks of God in the familiar manner of patristic theology. He is "impassible, immutable, incorrupt, blessed, and eternal."⁸³ He is one and perfect,⁸⁴ and He is also "incomprehensible and unspeakable, and fully known to no other than Himself."⁸⁵ The doctrine of God is summarized in the *Epitome of the Divine Institutes*: "There is, then, one God, perfect, eternal, incorruptible, incapable of suffering, subject to no circumstance or power, Himself possessing all things, ruling all things, whom the human mind can neither estimate in thought nor mortal tongue describe in speech."⁸⁶

Lactantius' central concern regarding the doctrine of God is especially evident in his treatise on divine anger. It is to present and defend the doctrine of divine providence.⁸⁷ *De ira Dei* was written in 313 or 314. It is quite systematic and consistent throughout, so we will examine the arguments of Lactantius in the order in which they are given.

Many persons, he says, hold that God is not angry, either because anger is in conflict with His goodness or because He does not care about us at all. We know better than those philosophers who hold one or the other opinion, because our innate ignorance regarding God has been

⁷⁹ 2, 26.

⁸⁰ 7, 3.

⁸¹ 1, 18.

⁸² 7, 5.

⁸³ *Div. inst.* 1, 2, 9.

⁸⁴ 1, 3.

⁸⁵ 1, 8.

⁸⁶ 3.

⁸⁷ See E. F. Micka, *The Problem of Divine Anger in Arnobius and Lactantius* (SCA 4; Washington: Catholic University, 1943) 81-112.

taken away by revelation.⁸⁸ The first step in attaining true knowledge of God is to reject the popular religion; the second is "to perceive with the mind that there is but one supreme God, whose power and providence made the world from the beginning and afterwards continues to govern it."⁸⁹ The third and final step is the acceptance of Jesus' teaching, which moves us to knowledge and worship of the true God.

Because he has discussed the first step in another book,⁹⁰ Lactantius begins with the second. There are those who do accept the oneness of God but incorrectly understand His nature. They "deny that God has any figure (*figuram*) or think that He is moved by no affection, because every affection is a sign of weakness (*imbecillitatis*), which has no existence in God." Others take anger away from God but believe Him to be kind. Lactantius lists all the possible solutions to the problem of God's emotions and then proceeds to discuss each one. The possible solutions are: (1) God has anger but no kindness; (2) God has neither anger nor kindness (Epicurus); (3) God has kindness but no anger (Stoic); (4) God has both anger and kindness.⁹¹

The first solution is easily excluded: no one believes this about God, because it is unreasonable and incredible. It is inconsistent with God's goodness only to be angry. Against the second solution Lactantius argues: if God is not *moved* (a quality which belongs to a living being), if He does nothing unique and worthy of Him as governor of the world, He simply does not exist. "What happiness, then, can be in God, if He is always inactive, being at rest and immovable, if He is deaf to those who pray to Him and blind to His worshipers? What is so worthy of God...as providence?"

The Epicurean view is excluded on the grounds that if God feels nothing whatsoever, there is no concern for the world and no divine providence. If divine concern and providence disappear, so does divine reflection and perception, and therefore divine existence.⁹²

The third solution is rejected: if one emotion is felt by God, so must its opposite, since opposite emotions are caused by opposite external circumstances.⁹³ To be consistent with Himself, God must feel hatred for the wicked people just as He feels love for the good, "because the loving of the good arises from the hatred of the wicked, and the hating of the wicked has its rise from the love of the good." To love, one must also hate, since "there are those who ought to be loved and there are those who ought to be hated." Lactantius does not believe that a Christian should repress his negative feelings; they are appropriate to some life

⁸⁸ 1.⁸⁹ 2.⁹⁰ *Div. inst.* 5-6.⁹¹ 2.⁹² 4.⁹³ 5.

situations.⁹⁴ Besides, the emotional life has a unity of its own, a *commotio* in us and in God which cannot be set aside.⁹⁵

The correct solution is to think of God as feeling anger as well as kindness. All of piety and religion depends upon this understanding.⁹⁶ Lactantius proceeds to explain why religion is necessary for man.⁹⁷ Religion "cannot be taken away without destroying our hold of wisdom, by which we are separated from the brutes, and of justice, by which the public life may be maintained. . . ." If you remove God's kindness or anger or both, you take away religion. If you take away religion, you lose that which is uniquely human, and that which is necessary for the social order, especially the fear of the Lord's punishment.⁹⁸

In chapter 15 Lactantius makes a necessary distinction about God's emotions: there are those He feels and those He cannot feel. God cannot have fear, because He is "liable neither to want nor injury nor pain nor death . . .," which are the causes of fear. He can do whatever He wishes and therefore envies no one.⁹⁹ He has no sexual passion, because He has no need of a successor or consort. God is also free of avarice and grief.¹⁰⁰ But favor (*gratia*), anger, and pity (*miseratio*) have their occasion (*materia*) in God, as well as patience.¹⁰¹ Each of God's emotions is a fitting providential response to some historical circumstance.¹⁰²

Lactantius' theology of God rests crucially on this point: God feels what He needs to feel for purposes of divine governance. He does not, however, have emotions which conflict with divine perfection. Both Novatian and Arnobius argue against real divine feelings on the ground that that which feels is corruptible. Tertullian distinguishes between feeling and corruptibility, holding that they do not necessarily imply each other. Lactantius simply turns the corruptibility argument of Arnobius around. Corruptibility belongs to the *unfeeling* being. To be absolutely at rest (*quietus*) is to be dead. God is eternally alive and never at rest in His divine governance. Therefore he is not corrupted precisely because He has emotions.¹⁰³

The divine anger is carefully described in a manner which makes it worthy of God. Divine anger is reasonable and wise. It is justified if its motive is the correction of evil, as it is in God's case, and not vengeance.¹⁰⁴ It belongs to man and to God alike, but God always feels it at the right time and place.¹⁰⁵ Finally, divine anger is necessary for the preservation of God's authority.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁴ See *Div. inst.* 6, 15.

⁹⁵ 4.

⁹⁶ 6.

⁹⁷ 7-8.

⁹⁸ 12.

⁹⁹ 13.

¹⁰⁰ 16.

¹⁰¹ 20.

¹⁰² 16.

¹⁰³ 17.

¹⁰⁴ 17.

¹⁰⁵ 18; 21.

¹⁰⁶ 23.

Lactantius' treatise on divine anger makes it clear how important it was to him to have a theology of God which maintains His personality. Without divine personality and the emotions which accompany it, the Christian doctrine of providence is lost for Lactantius. The Christian understanding of providence and divine personhood cannot be rendered in a consistent and meaningfully religious way if one adheres strictly to the Middle Platonist or Epicurean conception of God's transcendent immutability. Lactantius saw this quite clearly, as did Tertullian.

CONCLUSION

The three types of divine mutability which Tertullian saw raise interesting possibilities for theology, despite his incapacity to systematically construct a consistent doctrine of God. He felt that God had to change in order to adopt a new attitude to a new situation, that is, to human sinfulness. God also had to feel appropriate emotions to be a judge as well as to love His people properly. Finally, as historical circumstances changed, so necessarily did God's will for us.

Novatian sees the necessity for God's emotions, especially for His wrath, but does less with this insight than Tertullian because he eventually takes refuge in God's incomprehensibility. To proceed in a positive, rational description of God, one must specify exactly where incomprehensibility lies, so that the theory itself guards against any premature appeal to it. Arnobius, of course, denies the possibility of divine emotions and mutability because of his concern to distinguish the Christian God from the many deities of Greece and Rome. He takes refuge, one might suggest, in Epicurus, thereby ruling out any rational understanding of God's mutability.

Lactantius, on the other hand, faces squarely the problem of divine emotions and mutability and is able to formulate his insight logically. In reaction to Arnobius, he argues that God must react to the world in a providential manner, and that this reaction must include emotions. Both he and Tertullian see clearly, however, that God must have emotions in some divine manner, either by feeling only the most appropriate emotions or by having all emotions perfectly.

One might fruitfully compare the discussions of divine mutability in these writers with those of Augustine, who sees no possibility whatever for including emotion and mutability in his description of God. One might suspect, if one read only Augustine, that the discussions we have outlined never occurred. In text after text Augustine consistently asserts divine immutability, thereby intensifying the classical theological problems of creation in time, divine influence and human freedom, predestination, and divine foreknowledge.

This study suggests that a contemporary theology which attempts

realistically to uphold God's personhood, especially in regard to His emotions and His ability to change, does have the weight of some important theological tradition on its side, despite its divergence from Augustine and the mainstream of early theology in the East. Whatever direction one takes in constructing a contemporary doctrine of God, it is important to notice that the theological tradition, at least in this case, does present alternatives.