The separation between politics and religion is the hallmark of modern politics. We own that paradigm from Enlightenment philosophers. It is, however, of a much earlier date. It characterized already the very religion the Enlightenment turned against. In the fourth century, Christianity took its distance with respect to the existing politics. The strange thing, however, is that it did it precisely at the moment that it became the most popular — and after a while the only official — religion of the Roman Empire. While replacing the *religio romana*, Christianity introduced a split within the age-old marriage between Rome’s Republic/Empire and its religion. Once become *religio romana* — and thus a real ‘political religion’ (which for the Romans was a pleonasm) — Christianity redefined the political status of the Empire and consequently the paradigm of politics as such. In fact, the Christian split between ‘*religio*’ and ‘*civitas*’ redefined each of the terms as well as their mutual relation. It formed a new paradigm dominating politics and culture in western civilization till now. In sum, it created the West as such.²

² ‘What truly introduced the West is […] the formation of a dual or bipolar society, constituted of two entities, distinguished from one another without possible confusion, and not having the same status: the one, the Church, structured like a State and enjoying all its (institutional, intellectual, spiritual, ritual, symbolic) prerogatives, the other, the city, recollecting all that is not the Church – the rest – constituted by lack and which the former disqualified as ‘world’, hence deprived of a center giving it a proper, autonomous existence.’ Sachot 2007: 47; my translation, MDK.
This chapter elaborates upon this central thesis in Maurice Sachot’s work on Early Christianity³, as just presented in a nutshell. After a brief exploration of that thesis, I follow more in detail the path Christianity has gone from ‘philosophy’ to ‘religion’ by presenting a reading of two early Christian texts: the anonymous Epistle to Diognetus and the Apologeticum by Tertullian. By way of conclusion, I try to clarify incarnation as a figure concretizing the paradox of monotheism which, while religion critical in its core, keeps itself situated within the boundaries of religion.

1. The way(s) of Early Christianity

Maurice Sachot’s provocative thesis intents to shut a new light on Christian religion, i.e. on what it means that Christianity has become what the Romans called ‘religio’. To understand the full implications of that statement, one has to remember that ‘religio’ is a proper Roman (Latin) word having no equivalent in Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic or any other language of the Antique World. For what we still call ‘religion’, having borrowed the term precisely from the Romans, these languages simply have no term. So, it is not a redundant question to ask, as Sachot does, what happened when, at the end of the second century, Tertullian introduced the word into the Christian doctrine and baptized Christianity as ‘vera religio veri Dei’, ‘the true religion of the true God’? ⁴ But also: what was Christianity before it was a ‘religio’? And how has it entered religio, and by doing so, change it?

Sachot’s work retakes the history of Christianity’s origin and describes it as a mixture of three components: Hellenistic Diaspora Judaism, Hellenism and what he called ‘Romanity’ [romanité]⁵. The three components follow one another in time, each later added component ‘subverting’ the earlier synthesis.⁶ The last and most dominant one, the Roman component, reshaped the united Judaic and Hellenistic forms of Christianity into a genuine (i.e. Roman) ‘religio’, creating the West’s paradigm mentioned above.

---

³ Sachot elaborates his thesis in (in translation): The Invention of Christ: Genesis of a Religion (Sachot1998) and When Christianity has changed the world (Sachot 2007).
⁵ Sachot 2007: 78.
⁶ In fact, to a larger extent, Maurice Sachot method is the one introduced by Régis Debray and entitled ‘mediology’ (29-40; 85; 140; 225). It claims the perception of a term to prevail over its content. So, it describes history by analyzing the way in which the main terms of a period or culture are commonly understood, and how the evolution of this reception have changed the meaning of the term and, subsequently, of the reality these terms stand for. See: Debray 1991, particularly chapter 4 (‘Le mystère de l’incarnation’) and chapter 5 (‘L’expérimentation chrétienne’).
Christianity was first only a reformation movement within Judaism. Think of the long speech Stephen, the very first martyr, hold before the Sanhedrin just before he got stoned. It is obvious that his testimony simply repeats the core of Jewish monotheism, concluding that all prophets who had said that have been “persecuted by your ancestors” – thus anticipating his own martyr’s death. More decisive for the future of the ‘Jesus movement’ might have been the environment in which it has been received. This was not so much the homogeneous ‘Hebrew’ Judaism dominant within the boundaries of Israel’s territory, but the Hellenistic one as dominant in the Diaspora. Hence the tension between the Christians of Jerusalem and the ones from cities outside Israel, who were soon guided by early Christianity’s most energetic ‘apostle’, Paul of Tarsus. He is the one who emancipated Jesus’ reformation from strict Judaism (including obedience to the Torah, Temple offices, circumcision, et cetera) in order to make the movement accessible for anyone, for both ‘Jew and Greek’ (Gal 3: 28). The institutional structure of that movement was modeled on the synagogue, be it in the sense it had in the Diaspora where it was the unique center of the community – whereas in Israel, there was that other, first in line center: the Temple. And from the Jewish Diaspora communities, the Christian ones copied the ‘political’ structure including the ‘senat’ (gerousia), the elderly authorities (presbuteroi) and the leader of the people (‘ethnarkès’, who later became the bishop).

Far away from the unique Temple in Jerusalem, the cult in Diaspora Judaism was reduced to reading and commenting holy texts in the synagogue. But since the environment the Jews lived in were the Greek speaking cities all over the Roman Empire, this kind of Judaism felt, more than the one in Jerusalem, the need to explain itself with respect to that other big tradition of ‘reading and interpreting texts’, namely philosophy as it was ‘institutionalized’ in a variety of schools. It is in that horizon that, Diaspora Jews, who often had Greek as their native tongue, created their own Jewish textual tradition, the Sapiential

---

7 Stephen concludes: “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.” (Acts 7: 51-54; New International version). Notice that in the entire speech (Acts 7: 2-54) Christ is not mentioned at all; it is all about Moses and the Law he received from God. So, strictly spoken, is it for telling this – the core of Judaism – that Stephen is killed. For the Jewish character of early Christianity – and more specifically its borderline with Judaism which often is hard to discover – see, among others, Boyarin 2004.


9 Sachot 2007: 144. For a larger part, the typically ‘religious’ vocabulary – such as the use of ‘hiereis’ (priests) instead of ‘presbuteroi’, or the word ‘sacrifice’ to indicate the memory-event of the Last Supper – only dates from the fourth century, the century in which Christianity turned into religio. See for instance Sachot 2010: 86; 281.
one, adding it to a Bible translated into Greek (Septuagint).\textsuperscript{10} If it did not perform itself as a proper Jewish philosophy competing with the other ‘philosophies’ of its time, it was at least seen that way by a lot of non-Jewish Greek-Roman citizens who were fascinated by that high standard moral religion. Despite the fact that Judaism was a ‘tribal’ religion, limited to the descendants of Abraham, and consequently not open to non-Jews, there was nonetheless an important amount of Greek-Roman sympathizers who partly took over the Jewish Law (the so-called ‘God-fearing people’) or – after year of studying Hebrew, taking over all Jewish costumes including circumcision – succeeded in becoming Jew (the ‘proselytes’).\textsuperscript{11}

It is in this kind of Hellenistic Judaism relatively open to – and solicited by – non-Jews that the Jesus’ message has found entrance. According to Sachot, that early Christian movement took shape as one of the many didaskalkeia , the then term for ‘philosophical school’ which soon became a fixed term in early Christianity.\textsuperscript{12} It did not present itself as ‘religion’ (since that word did not even exist in the Greek they spoke), but – as used in the first lines of the Didachë\textsuperscript{13}– as a ‘hodos’, a ‘path, a ‘way of life’, a ‘philosophy’ offering a “moral and spiritual direction”.\textsuperscript{14} In this perspective, it is significant that Paul when, in Ephese, had no success in the synagogue, he simply went teaching with Tyrannos who run a philosophical school in that town, so the Acts tell.\textsuperscript{15}

Already the terminology of early Christianity reveals its ‘philosophical’ nature: Jesus was a ‘master/teacher’ (didaskalos) to ‘disciples’ (mathetai: those who learn); to become Christian one had to go the didactic lessons, the ‘didaskalia’, of which the content was

\textsuperscript{10} To the Sapiential tradition belongs the so called deuterocanonical books such as Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach), Wisdom, Song of Songs.

\textsuperscript{11} There were specific terms for those categories: ‘phoboumenoi ton theon’ (God-fearing people) and ‘prosèlutoi’ (proselytes); Sachot 2007: 167. For an interesting criticism on the allegedly biological grounds of the Jewish people, see Sand 2009. The author’s thesis is that proselytism is much larger that commonly thought.

\textsuperscript{12} Sachot 2007: 111. Another contemporary word for ‘philosophical school’ is hairesis, which Tertullian translated as secta (from sequi: to follow); see for instance Apologeticum 3, 6 (Tertullian 1977: 20-21). In Christianity, those terms ended up having a negative connotation (heretic, sectarian) (Sachot 1998; 185; 2007: 114).

\textsuperscript{13} Ehrman 2003a: 416-417. The Didache toon dodeka apostoloon (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) is one of the earliest Christian texts (“older than the canonical gospels”, Milavec 2003: ix) summarizing the doctrine. The first line reads: “There are two paths [hodoi duo eisi], one of life and one of death!” For the use of ‘hodos’ see also: Červenková 2014: 88.

\textsuperscript{14} In Everett Furguson (2003: 320) we read that “the religion of many in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, especially among the educated, was philosophy. Philosophy provided a criticism or reinterpretation of traditional religion and offered its own moral and spiritual direction”. Early Christianity was such kind of philosophy, lived as “religion”, provided that one takes “religion” in our modern sense of the term.

\textsuperscript{15} “But when divers ones were hardened and believed not, but spoke evil of that Way [hodos] before the multitude, he departed from them and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school [scholè] of one Tyránnos. And this continued for the space of two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the Word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.” (Acts 19: 9-10; 21\textsuperscript{st} Century King James Version). See also: Sachot 2007: 169.
summarized in the Didachè. On the level of content, the teaching was first of all a moral way of life, a path to follow in the full ethical sense of the word. In its exposition of “the way” – the “one of life” opposed to the “one of death” – the Didache does not explain doctrinal issues as ‘incarnation,’ ‘resurrection’ and ‘assumption’; it teaches how to behave among one another (‘in brotherly love’) and with regard to non-christians (‘love those who persecute you’). The major ‘doctrinal’ issue mentioned only at the end of the text is the Last Judgment, precisely to emphasize the importance of a morally perfect ‘way of life’.

And that way was claimed to be the way of the truth and was ‘philosophically’ and ‘logically’ defended in what not incidentally was called ‘apologia’s’. So, it is not a surprise, then, that the great majority of the ‘apologists’ of the second century named themselves ‘philosophers’. They were obviously trained in philosophy and claimed ‘christianismos’ to be the ‘true philosophy’ (in contrast to ‘iudaismos’ and other ‘philosophiae’).

A ‘true philosophy’: not the one embracing the debate among the ‘searchers for truth and wisdom’, but the one pretending to possess the answer to all philosophical debates (applying the Jewish idea of fulfillment – fulfillment of the Scriptures, fulfillment of the Messianic expectations – to the variety of the philosophical research of that time).

When this truth ceased to perform itself in reference to philosophy, when Christianity pretended to be not simply the true philosophy, but a religio, and what is more, the ‘true religion of the true God’, things paradigmatically changed. Defining itself as religio, “it could no longer consider itself as simply an enclave in the society, as a particular group [...] it could be but the religio of the societas, this is to say the societas as such, as what signifies itself in its religio”. As religio it surpassed the boundaries of a ‘philosophy’, of a ‘way of living’ or a ‘view on the word’ among others. It became a concrete symbolic universe affecting every detail of the citizen’s life not (only) in so far that citizen shared Christianity’s particular ‘philosophy’, but in so far he was a citizen. For the (pagan) Romans, there was no religion outside the religio of the city. For the christianized religio (and/or religionized Christianity), too, there will be no religiosity outside its own domain. However, while the

---

16 Sachot 2007: 239.
19 ‘True philosophy’ is a common term in the works of Justin, Tatianus, Athenagoras, Theophilos and others (Červenková 2014: 88). The term ‘iudaismos’ is first used, in contrast to ‘hellenismos’, in 2 Macc 2:2; 14:37. Paul uses the term in Galatians 1: 13. ‘Christianismos’, in contrast to Judaism, is for the first time used by Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, around 110 (in: To the Magnesians 10:3).
20 Sachot 2007: 260. A few pages further, the author refers to Tatian (end of the second century) who, on that ground, rejected all philosophy, philosophy as such (Sachot 2007: 264).
religio romana included all other religions and appropriated their gods and rituals, the religio christianana, build on its universal truth claim, excluded all other religions. Christianity, become a ‘religiously organized philosophy’, surpassed its philosophical paradigm by pretending its true philosophy to be the ‘grammar’ for universal citizenship as such.

This paradigm shift coincided so to say with the one from Greek to Latin, since it occurred first in the Christian communities of ‘Africa’ (now Tunisia), one of the most Romanized parts of the Empire, where the intellectual language was not Greek (as it was elsewhere) but Latin. Add to this that the thinkers there were, rather than philosophers, lawyers, intellectuals educated in jurisdiction and shaping Christianity in a more formal, ritual and institutionalized way. In that milieu, at the end of the second century, Tertullian wrote his apologetic works, defining for the first time in its still young history Christianity as a religion. (Philosophical) christianismos became religio christianana: the ‘vera religio veri dei’. In that passage he defends the “christiani” against the accusation as if they should be “irreligious”. Not they, but the Romans are “irreligious; the “charge of treason”, is “to the Roman religion”, we read. Referring to “christiani”, he writes:

This whole confession of theirs, whereby they deny that they [Roman deities] are gods and declare that there is no other god but the One whose subjects we are, is quite sufficient to repel the charge of treason to the Roman religion. For if there is no religion, since you [pagan Romans] have no gods for certain, then it is certain we [Christians] are not guilty of violating religion. On the contrary, your charge will act as a boomerang upon yourselves. In worshiping falsehood you not only neglect – or, I should say, do violence to – the true religion of the true God [veram religonem veri dei non modo neglando], you actually commit the crime of positive irreligion [in verum committiti crimem verae irreligiositatis]. (Apologeticum 24, 1-2)

In the ears of the majority of his contemporaries, Tertullian’s use of the words ‘vera religio’ (true religion) must have sounded as nonsensical. For, in the eyes of the Romans, religio had nothing to do with truth. It was a matter is behaving correctly with respect to the gods who did not transcend the existing world (as eternal truths, for instance, like Greek philosophy interpreted allegorically the sacred myths). They were simply co-citizens, be it of an immortal

---

22 Tertullian, Apologeticum 24: 2.
24 “Philosophy, for this is the generic category in which it was thought in Greek, could certainly have as object what the named by the word religio. But it could itself not be compared to a religio! Tertullian’s semantic gesture was thus no only surprising from the Latin perspective. It was also surprising from the Greek one! Applied to Christianity, religio did neither correspond to what, at that time, the word meant in Latin nor to the Christian reality Tertullian indicated with it.” Sachot 2007: 108; my translation, MDK.
kind. The scrupulous rituals honoring these gods were essential for the maintenance of the Roman res publica. And since the urbs (city) had conquered the orbis (surrounding world) and become an empire, that religion was supposed to be able to include the gods of all its conquered people. For the Romans, declaring this religio false and promoting another one as true made absolutely no sense.

Tertullian was the first Roman citizen to promote the contrary. Translating christianismos into religio’, not only the new criterion of truth entered the sphere of the religio, but truth itself – or at least the ‘true philosophy’ – is now supposed to function as religio – in the inherently ‘political’ sense of the (Latin) word. Christianity ceased to be simply a way of life or a Weltanschauung. It considered itself to be a political institute of universal scope and a candidate to deliver a legitimatizing narrative of the Empire, founding it in the divine, i.e. in what the Romans called the ‘numinous’. Soon, Tertullian’s oeuvre became popular among Latin Christianity and, a little more than a century later, procured the new paradigm through which Christianity understood itself.

So, when at the beginning of the fourth century, Constantine embraced Christianity, he did it in its quality of religio. Most probably, he considered it an excellent candidate to become the new founding ‘ideology’ for Rome’s empire. Did Christianity not understand itself as a agapeic community, a community claiming to be the Messianic fulfillment of the Law that God had given to the Jewish people, a state to be realized now for “Jew and Greek”, as Saint Paul defined universal mankind? A perfect ‘ideology’ sustaining the social order of the empire, the emperor might have thought. However, things did not turn out exactly the way he and his successors might have dreamt. They had not taken into account that the ‘civitas perfecta’ (‘perfect citizenship’) the Christians had in mind was not meant to be realized in the existing society, but in their own society, in the agapeic community they had already given shape and which they were now able to develop on a universal scale – a community which, precisely, did not coincide with the existing community of the Roman empire. In the eyes of the Christians, the really true society is an entirely Christian one,

25 According to Cicero, for instance, “humans belong to the same societas, the same civitas as the gods that what connects them is the common law. Cf Cicero, Leg. 1,2,3 (Loeb 16,16).” (Červenková 2014: 91)
26 ‘Scrupulous attitude’ is the proper meaning of religio, a Latin word which does not derive from ‘religare’ (to renew, ‘re-’, connection, ‘liga’), as a late antique, Christian etymology (by Lactantius) claims, but from ‘religere’: to consider, to read, to perform (legere) over and over again (re-). The contrary is religere, to neglect. Sachot 2007: 95-96; 303.
27 “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.” Saint Paul, Letter to the Galatians, 3: 27-29.
anchored already in the post-apocalyptic, post-eschatological realm in heaven, and leaving the existing ‘earthly’ society beheaded.28

So, though de facto emperors such as Constantine or Theodosius remained the ruler of the Roman empire, de iure, the religion they supported was not necessarily supporting them nor the civitas they were responsible for. As religion, Christianity was supposed to provide foundation and structure to the existing society, but it never simply limited itself to this function taking often position against the existing society, claiming that the Christian belong to a radical different, unworldly world. In that sense one can say that Christianity, once turned into religio romana, installed a the split between religion and empire, between the church and the state. That split has characterized Western politics for more than a millennium and a half and is still one of the most strongly accepted principles of today’s politics.

2. A philosophy …

This split has already been prepared in early Christianity, in the time it established itself as ‘philosophical school’. Take for instance the Epistle to Diognetus, a short text classified under the so-called Apostolic Fathers. In this anonymous letter29 the author tries to convince a pagan recipient to convert himself to Christianity. If the growing consensus dating the text in the second half of the second century is correct, the letter offers a good summary of how Christianity in the middle of the second century defined itself. And this is first of all as religion critique.

Consider the true nature and form of those you call and consider to be gods, not only with your eyes but also with your mind. Is not one of them a stone, like that which we walk on? And another copper, no better than utensils forged for our use? And another wood, already rotted? And another silver, needing someone to guard it, to keep it from being stolen? And another iron, … [1, 1-2] 30

In the following lines, using all of his rhetorical forces, the author repeats in a variety of ways that gods Diognetus worships are no gods at all. It is obvious that Christianity enters the scene of its time under the banner of truth: as a ‘philosophical school’ of ‘way of life’ fighting vain

29 For a bilingual edition of the text, see: Ehrman 2003: 121-159. The tradition has soon given a name to the author of this Epistle: ‘Mathètès’, Greek for ‘Disciple’ (Costache 2012: 32). It underscores, by the way, Sachot’s observation of how inherently philosophical early Christian vocabulary was.
30 Ehrman 2003b: 133.
illusions. Armed with both philosophical arguments and arguments borrowed from Jewish monotheism, it does on a universal scale what the Jews has done for their own people: proclaiming truth to be the criterion with respect to man’s relation to the divine. But why then “the Christians do not worship like the Jews?”, the author asks.

Now by abstaining from the kind of divine worship just mentioned, the Jews rightly claim to worship the one God who is over all and to consider him Master. But when they worship him like those already mentioned, they go astray. [3, 2] 31

Jews worship the true God, but in a false way. This is why Judaism has to be rejected. Relying on bloody sacrifices, they intend to give something to God, and this very intention denies the truth of God, i.e. the fact that he does not need anything since He is the one who gives all.

But those who suppose they are performing sacrifices of blood and fat and whole burnt offerings, and thereby to be bestowing honor on him by these displays of reverence, seem no different to me from those who show the same honor to the gods who are deaf—one group giving to gods who cannot receive the honor, the other thinking that it can provide something to the one who needs nothing. [3, 5] 32

But how than the religious critical Christians behave themselves in relation to God? How is their way of worship? The author’s first answer is evasive:

I suppose you have learned enough about how the Christians are right to abstain from the vulgar silliness, deceit, and meddling ways of the Jews, along with their arrogance. But do not expect to be able to learn from any human the mystery of the Christians’ own way of worship. [4, 6] 33

And yet, the following sentence does give an answer. This is at least what the ‘for’ (‘gar’ in the Greek text) suggests:

For Christians [Christianoi gar] are no different from other people in their country, language, or customs. (5, 1)

33 Ehrman 2003b: 139.
What follows is an explanation about Christianity as a universal phenomenon or, more precisely, a universal citizenship:

Nowhere do they inhabit cities of their own, use a strange dialect, or live life out of the ordinary. They have not discovered this teaching of theirs through reflection or through the thought of meddlesome people, nor do they set forth any human doctrine, as do some. They inhabit both Greek and barbarian cities, according to the lot assigned to each. And they show forth the character of their own citizenship in a marvelous and admittedly paradoxical way [paradoxon] by following local customs in what they wear and what they eat and in the rest of their lives. [5, 2-4] 34

The Christians have a doctrine, they claim a truth, which has not its origin with the mortal humans but with divine, not with the pagan gods, but the Only One, True God. And how then they worship that God? Since He is universal, they have no specific way of living with that God, no “cities of their own”, no way of “life out of the ordinary”. They do like the others do, but they do it in a “paradoxical way”. The way they worship God is to live as citizens with other citizens, be it in a “paradoxical way”. It is then that the ‘split’ mentioned above – the split hallmarking western politics till now – emerges for the first time in all clarity:

They live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens [hoos paroikoi]; they participate in all things as citizens [hoos politai], and they endure all things as foreigners [hoos xenoi]. Every foreign territory is a homeland for them, every homeland foreign territory. [5, 5] 35

The way the Christians relate to their God, the way they worship him, is not by organizing sacrifices, having particular customs, cities, places or other ‘religious’ practices. This is what pagans do. Christians live related to a true God who, therefore, is not of this world. So, living themselves in this world, they honor their God by not ‘really’ living here, by realizing that their home and destiny is elsewhere. However, since they are not (yet) home, they have to live here, and have to do it as “aliens”, as “foreigners”. Quite paradoxical, indeed, but the real “paradoxon” is that these aliens and foreigners respect – and even love – the false “homelands” in which they are exiled. Citizens of another world, they do all they can to be

34 Ehrman 2003b: 139-141.
35 Ehrman 2003b: 141.
excellent citizens of this world. In a rhetorical tour de force, the author of the Epistle presents an evocation of what that means.

They marry like everyone else and have children, but they do not expose them once they are born. They share their meals but not their sexual partners. They are found in the flesh but do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth but participate in the life of heaven. They are obedient to the laws that have been made, and by their own lives they supersede the laws. They love everyone and are persecuted by all. They are not understood and they are condemned. They are put to death and made alive. They are impoverished and make many rich. They lack all things and abound in everything. They are dishonored and they are exalted in their dishonors. They are slandered and they are acquitted. They are reviled and they bless, mistreated and they bestow honor. They do good and are punished as evil; when they are punished they rejoice as those who have been made alive. They are attacked by Jews as foreigners and persecuted by Greeks. And those who hate them cannot explain the cause of their enmity. (5, 6-17) 36

Those who hate Christians cannot explain it, because they do not know the truth. They stick to false gods who they want to seduce with all kind of religious practices, sacrifices, processions, ceremonies, and other “stupidities”, while they simply have to live in the truth, a truth which being not of this world nonetheless guides that world, leading it to its salvation. They simply have to live ‘simply’: living the life everyone lives, be it without ‘religion’, without worshiping gods. This is the way Christians testify of the true origin and destiny of the world, of the truth that tells that the beating heart of the world not of that world. The author himself continues by putting it “simply”:

To put the matter simply, what the soul is in the body, this is what Christians are in the world. The soul is spread throughout all the limbs of the body; Christians are spread throughout the cities of the world. The soul lives in the body, but it does not belong to the body; Christians live in the world but do not belong to the world. The soul, which is invisible, is put under guard in the visible body; Christians are known to be in the world, but their worship of God remains invisible. (6, 1-5) 37

36 Ehrman 2003b: 141.
37 Ehrman 2003b: 141-143.
Which way do the Christians worship God? Now we understand why this way is ‘mysterious’, “invisible”. Their practice is similar to the one of the invisible God, giving life to all what is without being a visible element of that life, without being an element of that ‘all’. Thanks to the doctrine they were open to receive from God, Christians are so to say his representatives, and in that quality, they are the soul of the world, animating it, giving it anima, soul, and consequently, life.

Are the Christians in the Epistle to Diognetus ‘religious’? For sure, they are religion critical. This was the starting point of the letter. And that religion critical perspective does not really turn into a new religion. Although we may spontaneously read it like this, it is obviously contradicted by the invisible character of the worship of God as the Epistle put it. Here, Christianity is put forward as a philosophy – certainly religiously inspired, at least in our understanding of the word ‘religious’, but the text no doubt presents Christianity not as a ‘religious’ phenomenon. It is a truth claim, a ‘philosophy’, a way of life pretending to be based in an insight in the truth and drawing the practical consequences of that insight.

This makes that kind of Christianity tolerant, understanding, comprehensive with regards to other, different ‘philosophies’, or to anyone who has a different, even hostile view on Christianity. As the Gospel prescribes, it loves the ones who hate it. “The soul loves the flesh that hates it, along with its limbs; Christians love those who hate them”, we read in the next sentence of the Epistle (6, 6). Christians respect that there are other philosophies. They are wrong, of course, so the they say, but it suffice to be what we are, representatives of the truth, and it is then up to that truth to do what it has to do. The only thing we can do is to convince others of that truth. Which is what the author of the letter does with regard to Diognetus.

All this, so to say, still remains within boundaries that Plato once set: the soul is the invisible representative of the truth deep inside of is, and it is by dialoguing with one another that this truth can get born. Independent from what we are, what customs, country, ‘religion’ we have, we can let the invisible truth in us emerge. According to Plato, we have to do the practice of ‘thinking’ in order to let that happen. For the author of the Epistle, we have to practice the faith in the truth revealed by Jesus and his Father. But still, there is no specific religious way in which that truth has to be performed, lived, made operational.

So, what happens when that insight, this philosophy, becomes religion. Let us read Terutlian – for example his ‘Epistle’ to the pagans of his time, i.e. the Apologeticum (Apology).

3. … becoming religion

---

38 Ehrman 2003b: 143.
In the *Apology*, one can recognize a similar structure as in the *Epistle*: after a long section of ‘religion critique’, it explains what then the Christian alternative is. Yet, where the *Epistle* refuses to give that alternative any concrete content (it is a ‘mysterious’ way of being in the world without belonging to it) and certainly does not propose a kind of new ‘religion’, Tertullian does propose a concrete alternative and baptizes it ‘religion’ – thus using the same word both for what he criticizes and for the alternative he proposes.

When in the first chapters of his *Apologeticum*, Tertullian uses the word *religio*, it is exclusively in the sense of pagan Roman religion. *Religio* is matter of false gods, of illusions, even dangerous illusions, causing all kinds of violence. But, as we learned already in the *Epistle to Diognetus*, Christianity is there to denounce such lies. It is matter of religion critique. Ironically Tertullian somewhere writes that:

> in that most religious of all cities [in illa religiosissima urbe], the city of the pious race of Aeneas, is a certain Jupiter, whom they drench with human blood at his own games. (IX, 5)


or, a few pages further:

> you [, Romans,] really are still more religious [religiosiores esti] in the amphitheater, where over human blood, over the dirt of pollution of capital punishment, your gods dance, supplying plots and themes for the guilty – unless it is that often the guilty play the parts of the gods. (XV, 4)

*Religio* is not only a matter of bloodshed and other immoralities, it is above all a matter of money and dirty commerce as well:

But gods are more sacred the more tribute they pay; indeed, the more sacred they are, the bigger the tribute. Their majesty is made money-making. Religion goes round the cookshops begging [Circuit cauponas religio mendicans]. You exact a price for the ground one stands on in a temple, for the approach to the holy rite ; one may not know the gods for nothing ; they are for sale. (XIII, 6)

Does Tertullian criticize *religio* as such? In the first chapters, this was seemingly the case. But then, in the last line of chapter XVI, we read: “All such tales, then, we have cleared off, and

---

39 Tertullian 1984: 48-49.
40 Tertullian 1984: 78-79.
41 Tertullian 1984: 70-71.
turn now to expound our religion.” (XVI, 13, my emphasis, MDK) Tertullian’s religion critique proposes an alternative that he considers to be itself religion as well, be it a true religion: “vera religio veri dei”. On the level of content, by telling this, Tertullian says nothing new, except that he uses the term religio. On the long term, however, the consequences will be huge. The alternative for paganism will get affected by the very paganism it intends to replace. At least formally. All paganism was incorporated in one big universal institution spread over the Roman universe and sustaining its entire social and political life. To become religio’s alternative, Christianity will have to fulfil the same functions, be it this time in a true way. The taking over of that function – the becoming religion of the Christian ‘philosophy’ – will change Christianity thoroughly.

Certainly, it is not Tertullian who has reshaped all the functions fulfilled by religio in a now Christian way. But by naming the Christian ‘secta’ (‘school’, the common word for Christianity) religio’, he lays down the dispositive for rebuilding the Christian doctrine into a new universal religio sustaining the Roman civitas.

It is interesting to see how, even in this text, already the use of religio changes significantly the content of Christianity in relation to how it is defined in the Epistle to Diognetus. Tertullian starts “expound[ing] our religion” in a way similar to the Epistle:

What we worship is the One God; who fashioned this whole fabric with all its equipment of elements, bodies, spirits; who by the word wherewith He commanded, by the reason wherewith He ordered it, by the might wherewith He could do it, fashioned it out of nothing, to the glory of His majesty. Hence the Greeks also have given to the universe the name cosmos, ‘order.’ (XVII, 1)

This is Christianity as ‘philosophy’ (or, with a term Tertullian uses, as a ‘disciplina’, a doctrine ‘disciples’ are formed in): Christianity as an insight in the truth behind the phenomena. Tertullian refers to “the Greek” for a support of this thesis. But in the Epistle, this truth was invisible, invisible as the soul is to the body it sets in motion – remember the quoted passage from 6, 1-5. However, here in the Tertullian text, the invisibility is not simply invisible, it is a the same time visible as well. In the next sentence we read:

43 Tertullian 1984: 102; see also p. 115; 170, 176, 184, 192, 198.
44 Tertullian 1984: 86-87.
He [God] is invisible, though He is seen [Invisibilis est, etsi videatur]; incomprehensible, though by grace revealed; beyond our conceiving, though conceived by human senses. So true is He and so great. But what in the ordinary sense can be seen, comprehended, conceived, is less than the eyes that grasp it, the hands that soil it, the senses that discover it. The infinite is known only to itself. Because this is so, it allows us to conceive of God – though He is beyond our conceiving. The power of His greatness makes Him known [notum] to men, and unknown [ignotum]. And here is the sum total of their sin who will not recognize Him whom they cannot fail to know [Et haec est summa delicti nolentium recognoscere quem ignorare non possunt]. (XVII, 2-3)\(^45\)

This is no less paradoxical than what we read in the *Epistle*, but Tertullian puts the emphasis exactly where the Epistle does not. Despite of his acknowledged invisible character, the real emphasize is on God’s visibility. He is “unknown”, but nonetheless “known”. More precisely, he is known as unknown. It is paradoxical, but it is nothing else than the message of revelation, the core of all monotheism. “He is invisible”, of course, but since God has revealed himself, “He is seen”. And, consequently, it is revelation which makes it the summit of sin “not to recognize Him whom [you] cannot fail to know”.

Like the *Epistle*, Tertullian too uses the metaphor of the “soul”. But here, it is not the soul’s hidden character which is highlighted, the soul as ‘hated by the body’ that nonetheless it is animated by. In Tertullian, the soul is the sense of truth, the sense which, once it succeeds in being what it really is, cannot but see the true and (consequently) invisible God. One does not have to prove God, for from the moment the soul does its proper job, it will show God at once – so he writes in the lines following immediately the last quote:

Would you have us prove him to you from His own works, in their multitude and character, those works that contain us, that sustain us, that delight us; yes! and affright us? Would you have us prove Him to you from the witness of the human soul itself? Yes! the soul, be it cabined and cribbed by the body, be it confined by evil nurture, be it robbed of its strength by lusts and desires, be it enslaved to false gods, — none the less, when it recovers its senses, as after surfeit, as after sleep, as after some illness, when it recaptures its proper health, the soul names God, and for this reason and no other, because, if language be used aright, He is the one true God. ‘Great God!’ ‘Good God!’ ‘Which may God give!’ is the utterance of all men. That He is also Judge, is shown by such utterance as: ‘God sees;’ ‘I leave it to God;’ ‘God will repay me.’ O the witness of the soul, in its very nature Christian! And then, as it says these

\(^45\) Tertullian 1984: 86-87.
words, it turns its gaze not to the Capitol, but to heaven. For it knows the abode of the living God; from Him and from heaven it came. (XVII, 4-6)\textsuperscript{46}

Christianity is the soul of the world, the \textit{Epistle} stated. But unlike the Epistle, Tertullian no longer considers the soul only as a hidden force. It is at the surface of everything and has to be recognized as such. It is up to Christianity to bring the soul – the soul of the individual, the soul of the community – to the surface.

This idea is behind Tertullian’s re-definition of Christianity as \textit{religio}. “The soul [is] in its very nature Christian!”, he writes. And so is also the soul of the world, which is why Christianity is \textit{religio}, i.e. the true force and practice that sustains the world, especially the human world of civilization. For the pagan Romans this force and practice was named \textit{religio} and penetrated every segment of the citizen’s private and public life, giving at the same time foundation and shape to the Empire’s entire political system. It is time now, Tertullian claims, to recognize the \textit{true} force and practice realizing this, it is time to acknowledge \textit{religio} in its \textit{truth}, which is to say: to make it Christian.

Christianity is not simply a ‘philosophy’ or ‘disciplina’, claiming a truth different from others. Christianity is the truth of \textit{all} that claiming, of all ‘philosophies’, a truth which is to be implemented via its general acceptance as \textit{religio vera}. It is the \textit{true} God – the God as revealed to Moses and the Jewish prophets – who is behind all philosophical truth-claims and who now, in the shape of Christian \textit{religio}, has to become the universally recognized soul of the world. A few pages further we read:

It was by this Moses too that their peculiar Law was sent to the Jews by God. Much follows; and other prophets older than your literature. For the very last who sang was either a little antecedent to your sages and your legislators, or at any rate of the same period. For Zacharias lived in the reign of Cyrus and Darius, at the very time when Thales, chief of the philosophers who wrote of Nature, could give no certain answer to Croesus’s inquiry as to deity — perplexed, I suppose, by the words of the prophets. Solon told the same king that the end of a long life must be seen—much as the prophets did. So it can be seen that your laws and your studies alike were fertilized from the law and teaching of God; the earlier must be the seed. Hence you have some tenets in common with us, or very near us. (XIX, 1) \textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{46} Tertullian 1984: 86-89.
\textsuperscript{47} Tertullian 1984: 95.
Christianity is the truth of all other truths, the truth of Judaism, the truth of Judaism, the one of the philosophers and the one of the founders of politics. Christianity now has to introduce that ultimate truth in the *religio* in order to let it rule the world. Since pagan religion is denounced as being build upon illusions, the true religion must take over that function. The soul animating the universe can no longer remain hidden, it has to become public – which for Tertullian is to say, it has to become *religio*, i.e. to replace the Roma’s pagan religion.

This is why Tertullian vehemently rejects the reproach as if the Christians should not be loyal the Empire and its Emperors. It is true, Christians refuse the ritual of sacrifice in favor of the Emperors’ statues. They do not consider them as divine. But does this imply they do not respect them in their position as highest authority of the Roman Empire? On the contrary. They pray for them with the *true* God, for they want his Empire in the hands of the *real* divine power.

Looking up to heaven the Christians—with hands outspread, because innocent, with head bare because we do not blush, yes! and without one to give the form of words, for we pray from the heart,—we are ever making intercession for all the Emperors. We pray for them long life, a secure rule, a safe home, brave armies, a faithful senate, an honest people, a quiet world—and everything for which a man and a Caesar can pray. (XXX, 4)  

Where, then, is the ‘split’ we mentioned above, the split making the Christian living *in* the world while being *not from* the world? A careful reading of the text learns that, in a secret way, the split has been transferred to the Romans and, so to say, planted right in the heart of, precisely, their religion. Here, Tertullian’s sublime rhetoric does an excellent job. You do with us, he fulminates against the Romans, exactly what you do with the victims of your sacrifices—you so to say split us like you split the bulls on your altars—and we, Christians, take this upon us and ‘christianize’ that. We allow you sacrifice us and this way we sacrifice ourselves, but we do this in order to bring the truth in the heart of your religious practice and to save both your religion and that what it is supporting, i.e. the emperor and the empire. Our holy martyrdom replaces your insane sacrifices. This is why that martyrdom of us is a genuine praise to the emperor and can in no way be compared with the flattery of the official rituals honoring him.  

48 A few paragraphs further, we read “[…] now we have stated that this school *sectam istam*; i.e. Christianity rests on the very ancient books of the Jews” (XIX, 1: Tertullian 1984: 103).

49 Tertullian 1984: 151.

50 For a elaborated study on Early Christian martyrdom, see Jensen 2010.
In the lines following the last quote, Tertullian, before declaring the Christians’ martyrdom as a prayer for the emperor, first describes what the Christian prayer is not:

Not grains of incense worth one halfpenny, tears of an Arabian tree, not two drops of wine, not blood of a worthless ox longing to die, and on top of all sorts of pollution a conscience unclean; — so that I wonder why, when among you victims are being examined by the most vicious of priests, the breasts of the victims rather than of the sacrificers should be inspected. While thus, then, we spread ourselves before God, let the hooks pierce us, the crosses suspend us, the fires play upon us, the swords gash our throats, the beasts leap on us. The very posture of the Christian at prayer is readiness for any torture. Go to it, my good magistrates, rack out the soul that prays to God for the Emperor [boni praesides, extorquete animam deo supplicantem pro imperatore]. Here lies the crime where God's truth is, where devotion to God is. (XXX, 6-7)  

By torturing the Christians, by doing to them what they do to sacrificial victims in their religious practices, the pagan romans unknowingly bring the soul of the world to the surface – a soul which we know now ‘is Christian by nature’. It is in their very crime, that the Romans can find “God’s truth”: in the Christians they molest⁵², they are given the opportunity to recognize the true devotion to God. And it is up to the Christians to testify this by fully assuming their martyrdom.

The Christians are in, but not from the world. Already in the Epistle to Diognetus we read that this was the reason why they were persecuted, witnessing as they were of a transcendent truth incompatible with the thoroughly immanent Roman religion. Tertullian’s Apologeticum however makes the Romans recognize that truth – and consequently that ‘split’ – in their own religion. While sacrificing the Christians they do not realize that, indeed, it is scarifying that they do, i.e. something profoundly religious and, what is more, performing the truth of their own religion which was unknown until then. That is why the Christians have to testify to that truth even – and precisely – in the hour of their ‘religious molestation’. From their perspective it is fully logical to consider their condemnation to death as the most excellent moment for testimony (which is the meaning of ‘martyrdom’: ‘martyrion’ in Greek, martyrium in Latin).

⁵² ‘Immolare’, ‘immolatio’, are the ‘technical’ terms for the killing of the sacrificed animal. “After the praefatio, the celebrant moved on the immolation (immolation) of the victim. In the Roman rite, he sprinkled the victim’s back with salted flour (mola salsa, hence the term immolation), poured a little wine on its brow, then ran the sacrificial knife along its spine.” (Sheid 2003: 83).
So, even expelled and slaughtered by the Roman empire, Christians prove their profound political loyalty. That’s why – as we read a few pages further – they should not be considered as one of the many illegal factions within Roman society, undermining the public interest of that society. But notice the argument Tertullian then puts forward:

We, however, whom all the flames of glory and dignity leave cold, have no need to combine [i.e. to form a separate association, in Latin a ‘factionus’]; nothing is more foreign to us than the State [nec ulla magis res aliena quam publica]. One state we know, of which all are citizens—the universe [Unam omniam rempublicam agnoscimus mundum]. (XXXVIII, 3) ¹³

Christians are loyal citizens of the Roman ‘republic’ [res publica], because they are not interested in the res publica at all, except the res publica which is the world [mundus]. Apparently, in Tertullian, Christianity has not really lost the ‘paradoxon’ we met in the Epistle. ¹⁴ Yet, it is rather the case that the paradox has given Christianity its final political shape. Given the context, the Christians’ disinterest in the res publica stands for their refusal to form an own political faction with a particular agenda lobbying in the republic’s milieus of power. Precisely that refusal makes them loyal to the universal politics, to the res publica ‘one and indivisible’ – to anachronistically name it with a term from Rousseau.

It is not that, in reality, Christianity cannot be considered as an proper group with a proper way of life. In the chapters that follow, Tertullian explains extensively the properties of Christian life. But introduced by the passage just quoted, the reader knows that the Christians have no political agenda of their own, the political dimension of their way of life consists only in supporting the universal res publica. It is in that sense that here, the dispositive is put ready for Christianity to replace the function of the Roman religion, to become itself that religion.

And this is what happened a little more than a century after Tertullian wrote his Apologeticum. We do not know precisely whether Constantin has read the Tertullian text, but he has certainly must have some knowledge of it, since the Apologeticum was still very popular among the Latin speaking Christians more than a century after Tertullian’s death. Anyway, since Theodosius’ decree making it the only legal religion, Christianity became the religion. Yet, the disinterest in the res publica remained. Being and feeling fully responsible for the religiosity and loyal citizenship of all the empire’s inhabitants, Christianity

---

¹³ Tertullian 1984: 173.
¹⁴ Ehrman 2003b: 139-141.
nevertheless considered itself to be a perfect societas clearly distinguished from the world’s imperfect one. That split in political loyalty – both to the worldly societas imperfecat and the heavenly societas perfecta – will hence characterize Western politics. That split will never be overcome, on the contrary, it will be continuously be activated and remain a constitutive element in the driving forces of Western political life. In one way or another, politics will be lived by citizens who are ‘in, but not from the world’.

4. Incarnated religion critique

In its earlier shape of ‘hodos’ (way of life, view of the world) and by way of its ‘philosophy, Christianity clearly put forward its religion critical core. Not what you think God is, is God (i.e. your sculptures of stone, your immoral mythologies), for only God is God, and this truth does translate itself not so much in sacrificial and other religious practices, but in a high standard ethical life, in an agapeic sociality of brotherly love. This is in a nutshell the message of the Didache, the Epistle to Diognetus, and so many other Early Christian writings.

However, by becoming religio, did Christianity not lose a lot of its religion critical dimension? Did Christianity not absorb all the function once ascribed to Rome’s pagan religion? Where is the genuine monotheistic criticism in the massive ‘Christianization’ of pagan rites, feasts, and other practices? And, by becoming a Roman (and consequently thoroughly) political religion, has it not turned into the legitimizing narrative sustaining the new empires and their emperors, the medieval kingdoms and their royal power of the Middle Ages and, even, the absolutistic monarchs of early modern states?

It is difficult to refute that assertion. Therefore, Christianity indeed became all too Roman. Not only has it legitimized the political power in all its forms for a period reaching till Early Modernity (it could only stopped abruptly by the French Revolution), it also turned its practice into a real religion, reintroducing a new kind of divine realm replacing what once were ‘the gods’: the supra-natural sphere of the ‘saints’ at whose advocacy one could reinstall again a kind of religious ‘commerce’, the gift-giving relation with a multiple divine and its grace. Surely, Christian religion never had claimed that one could simply ‘buy’ God’s grace, but it did not deny either that praying to the mediating saints could help a lot. For the majority of the Christians, this ‘commerce with the divine’ soon became the central (indeed) religious practice. That all reform movements in the Church’s history – among which the sixteenth

century Reformation was but one – have fought precisely against this kind of practices, shows how deeply rooted ‘religion’ in the old, pagan sense of the word have been in the people’s culture. And for more than a millennium all kinds of political regimes in the West did have used that kind of Christian ‘religion’ as a welcome support to consolidate their power and neutralize any possible criticism addressed to the sovereign policy they pursued. Precisely the ‘Roman’ aspect of Christianity lent itself perfectly to that.

However, Christianity’s religion critical aspect never has been totally absent in the history of the West either. There has always been a popular movement in ‘lower’ Christian society that was radically critical, if not to say anarchistic. The Middle Ages have known many of such movements, among which the one lead by Francis of Assisi was the most wide spread – be it that its anarchistic tendency, and despite of its enormous success, very soon turned into one of the strongest law-abiding forces in medieval Christianity. And it is well known as well that the sixteenth century Reformation is in direct line with such critical movements and tendencies during the centuries before.

The spirit of criticism is also far from being absent on Church’s highest levels. Even where power was wielded, Christianity’s monotheistic criticism persisted. Despite the fact that the Church delivered the legitimizing narrative to support the existing political power, that same Church never stopped criticizing that very power. Also here the ‘split’ of ‘being in, but not from the world’ showed its opportunity. Belonging at the same time to and not to the world, the Church allowed herself a critical attitude towards any kind of imperial (or civic) power. In the Middle Ages, the pope was never without criticism with regard to the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire or to the monarchal powers of the other Christian kingdoms. And of course the motive to do that was first of all the Church’s own interest – just like, similarly, the motives of the earthly powers criticizing the pope’s politics were so as well. The age-long persistence of that conflict however proved how deeply this split got embedded within the heart of western political power. On its highest level, the one of both the pontifical and the imperial power, no one was ever immune for criticism; and to defend their cause, both kinds of power used the Christian doctrine with the same legitimacy. All this kept the spirit of criticism alive within the very heart of power.

So, despite its full ‘religious dimension’, Christianity had not severed the ties with the critical, and even the religion critical core of monotheism. One might consider the concept of ‘incarnation’ as a Christian way to think the place of religion critique within a nonetheless fully ‘religious’ reality. For does ‘incarnation’ not mean that the reference to truth has to remain incarnated in that what it is criticizing? If God is truth, and truth is incarnated, is then
the genuine place of that truth not, instead of ‘home with itself’, with its opposite, with that which it is incarnated in: the world bathing in untruth? And that truth, precisely in the name of its incarnated condition, has it not to keep its position in the realm of non-truth?

In a way, the modern citizen is to be considered ‘incarnated’. He is in, but not from the world. At least this is the way he lives. He participates in society, but on a free base, and in order to enlarge his freedom or, if possible, to lead it to a point where he is free from that world. Both the starting point and the aim of the political life of modern man are located outside of the world. No longer a metaphysical or religious outside, but nonetheless an outside. It is from that radical free position that one is participates in modernity’s freedom-basic society. That position is untenable without a permanent attitude of criticism. For strictly spoke, it is an impossible position. There is simply no outside of society. Therefore society is too much that what men are living of. Yet, modernity is built upon the ‘myth’ of an originally independent free citizen who, on that very basis, has signed a social contract before entering society. It is clear that modern sociality is not possible without a constant criticism unmasking that nonetheless inevitable myth. It is in that critical questioning that men finds its most genuine freedom, the free distance he has with respect to the laws regulating his life, including his social and political life;

It is here that Christianity, and in principle all monotheistic religions, have to bring in their tradition in order to help constructing and maintaining modern society. Christianity has an age-long experience in dealing with a condition similar as the one which modern man is in (being in and not of the world), and the same way, it has a tradition in the movement of criticism and self-criticism being indispensable for that condition. The genuine locus of both Christian and modern criticism is within the realm it criticizes. It is a criticism which will never reach the shore of truth it nonetheless is referring to, but which, for that very reason, is no less full of sense.

It is not to say that Christianity offers that many examples of how to deal correctly with the incarnated locus of political criticism. Its history is full of quite non-exemplary ways to deal with it, but the struggle with that locus is there. Again and again, the truth Christianity claimed to turn in reality was used precisely to criticize those so-called realizations. Christianity, in its quality of monotheistic truth regime, shows the persistence of that indispensable supplement to any truth regime, which is criticism: a criticism practiced in the name of the truth and yet never neutralizable by that truth.

Christianity’s narrative is one of salvation promising a perfect world. The danger of that narrative is that, since perfection is no part of the human, mortal world, it all too easily
seduces people – certainly the ones in power - to do as if it fully realizes the promised state of perfection. This is why the ‘original supplement’ of its truth claim – its criticism – can never be – and was never – absent, and is to be considered as the very locus where its truth finds its incarnation.

It is this locus – and the struggle with it – that Christianity has to share with modernity. It is on the base of its long tradition, dealing with that incarnated locus of truth, that it has to participate in the modern truth regime. For modernity is no less characterized by the pretention to have the truth on its side, including all the anomalies that position generates. And here, too, the recognition of truth is to be located in the permanently persisting criticism undermining that very truth.

Christianity’s tradition has built up a certain expertise in this, which is why it can – and even must – lend its ear to the Poet’s imperative saying: “Il faut être absolument moderne”.

*Bibliography*


