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2

‘*VERA RELIGIO VERI DEI*’

5 A religion-critical monotheism becoming religion

10 Christianity appeared to be more like
a school of philosophy than a religion.
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The separation of State and Church is the hallmark of modern politics. We have been
15 subscribing to this paradigm since the philosophers of the Enlightenment. It dates back,
however, to much earlier times, as it was a characteristic of the very religion that the
Enlightenment reacted against. Already in the fourth century AD, Christianity distanced itself
from the then existing politics. Strangely enough, it did this precisely at the moment it
became the most popular – and after a while the only official – religion of the Roman Empire.
20 While it replaced the *religio romana*, Christianity drove a wedge in the age-old marriage
between Rome’s Republic/Empire and its religion. Once Christianity became itself *religio
romana* – and hence a true ‘political religion’ (which to the Romans was a pleonasm) – it
redefined the empire’s political status and consequently the paradigm of politics as such. In
fact, the Christian split between ‘*religio*’ and ‘*civitas*’ redefined each of these terms as well as
25 their mutual relation, and formed a new paradigm that dominates Western politics and culture
in Western civilization until today. In sum, it created the West as such.²

¹ Wilken 2003: 202.

² ‘What truly established the West is [...] the formation of a dual or bipolar society, constituted of two entities, clearly 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, gathering all that is not the Church – the remainders – constituted by default and disqualified by the former as ‘world’, hence deprived of a center giving it a proper, autonomous existence.’ Sachot 2007: 46; my translation, MDK.

The above chapter introduces Maurice Sachot's central thesis on Early Christianity³ and this chapter elaborates on it. After a brief exploration of Sachot's thesis, I follow in more detail the path Christianity went 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 to this chapter, I will try to clarify incarnation as a figure that concretizes the paradox of monotheism which, while religion-critical in its core, remains within the boundaries of religion itself.

1. The way(s) of Early Christianity

Maurice Sachot's provocative thesis intends to shed new light on Christian religion, i.e. on the significance of Christianity becoming what the Romans called '*religio*'. To understand the full implications of that statement, one has to remember that '*religio*' is a Roman (Latin) word proper to the Romans with no equivalent in Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic or any other language of the Antique World. For what we today still call 'religion', a term borrowed precisely from the Romans, these languages simply have no term. So it is not redundant to ask the question, as does Sachot, about what happened when Tertullian introduced the word *religio* into the Christian doctrine at the end of the second century, and when he baptized Christianity as '*vera religio veri dei*', 'the true religion of the true God'?⁴ But also we should ask what Christianity was before it was a '*religio*'? And how did it secure *religio*, and by doing so, change itself?

Sachot's work revisits the history of Christianity's origins and describes it as a mixture of three components: Hellenistic Diaspora Judaism, Greek Hellenism and what he called 'Romanity' [romanité: the act of becoming romanized].⁵ The three components are sequential in time, each later component 'subverting' the earlier synthesis.⁶ The last and most dominant one, the Roman component, reshaped the united Judaic and Hellenistic forms of

³ Sachot elaborates on his thesis in (in translation): *The Invention of Christ: Genesis of a Religion* (Sachot1998) and *When Christianity changed the World* (Sachot 2007).

⁴ Tertullian 1984: 131; Sachot 2007: 86; 28.

⁵ Sachot 2007: 78.

⁶ In fact, to a larger extent, Maurice Sachot's method is the one introduced by Régis Debray and entitled 'mediology' (29-40; 85; 140; 225). It claims the reception of a term to prevail over its content. So, it describes history by analyzing the way in which the main terminology of a period or culture is commonly understood, and how the evolution of this reception has changed the meaning of terms 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 into a genuine (i.e. Roman) *'religio'*, creating the West's paradigm mentioned above.

In its beginnings, Christianity was just a reformation movement within Judaism. Consider the long speech that Stephen, the very first martyr, held before the Sanhedrin just before he got stoned. It is obvious that his testimony simply repeats the core of Jewish monotheism, and he concludes that all the prophets who advocated it before him were “persecuted by your ancestors” – thus anticipating his own martyr's death.⁷ The environment in which Christianity was received may have been more decisive for the future of the ‘Jesus movement’. That environment was not so much the homogeneous ‘Hebrew’ Judaism dominant, which was found within the geographical boundaries of Israel, as much as the Hellenistic one, dominant in the diaspora.⁸ Hence the tension between the Christians of Jerusalem and those from cities outside Israel, who were soon guided by the most energetic ‘apostle’ of Early Christianity, Paul of Tarsus. He is the one who emancipated Jesus’ reformation beyond strict Judaism (including obedience to the Torah, Temple offices, circumcision, et cetera) in order to make the movement accessible to all, both ‘Jew and Greek’ (Gal 3: 28). The institutional structure of that movement was modeled on the synagogue, be it in the sense of the diaspora where it was the *unique* center of a community – whereas in Israel, there was always that other, first-in-line center, i.e. the Temple. It is from the Jewish diaspora communities that the Christian communities copied their ‘political’ structure including the ‘senat’ (*gerousia*), the council of elders (*presbuteroi*) and the presidents of the communities (*'ethnarkès'*, who later became the bishops).⁹

Far removed from the one and only Temple in Jerusalem, diaspora Judaism reduced its cult to the reading and commenting of holy texts in the synagogue. But since the Jews lived in Greek-speaking cities spread all over the Roman Empire, diaspora Judaism felt, more than its Jerusalem counterpart, the need to explain itself vis-à-vis that other big tradition of ‘reading and interpreting texts’, i.e. philosophy such as it was ‘institutionalized’ in a variety of schools.

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 speaking, is it for advocating this, the core of Judaism, that Stephen is killed. For the Jewish character of Early Christianity – and more specifically the dividing line with Judaism which often is hard to discern – see, e.g. Boyarin 2004.

⁸ The “Hellenists among the Hebrews” – “*toon Hellenistoon pros tous Hebraious*” – as mentioned in Acts 6: 1.
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.

It is in that context that diaspora Jews - who often had Greek as their native tongue - built their own Jewish textual tradition (Sapiential tradition), adding it to a Bible translated into Greek (Septuagint).¹⁰ Even if it did not perform like a proper Jewish ‘philosophy’ competing with the other philosophies of its time, it was at least perceived as if it were by many non-
 5 Jewish Greek-Roman citizens who were fascinated by such a high-standard ethical religion. Despite the fact that Judaism was a ‘tribal’ religion, confined to the descendants of Abraham and consequently closed to non-Jews, there were nonetheless an important number of Greek-Roman sympathizers who partly took over the Jewish Law (the so-called ‘God-fearing people’) or – after years of studying Hebrew and adopting all the Jewish customs, including
 10 circumcision – succeeded in becoming Jews (the ‘proselytes’).¹¹

It is in this kind of Hellenistic Judaism, relatively open to – and solicited by – non-Jews that the Jesus message found entrance. According to Sachot, the early Christian movement took shape as one of the many *didaskalkeia*, a term coined in Early Christianity¹² denominating ‘philosophical school’. This young Christian movement did not present itself as
 15 ‘religion’ (since that word did not even exist in the Greek they spoke), but – as indicated in the first lines of the *Didachè*¹³ – as a ‘hodos’, a ‘path, a ‘way of life’, a ‘philosophy’ offering “moral and spiritual direction”.¹⁴ In this perspective, it is significant that Paul of Tarsus, when he did not have success in the synagogue in Ephesus, simply went to teach with Tyrannos, who ran a philosophical school in the same town (so the Acts tell us).¹⁵

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

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 was much more widespread than commonly thought.

¹² Sachot 2007: 111. Another contemporary word for ‘philosophical school’ is *haireisis*, 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 by the time of Late Antiquity (heretic, sectarian) (Sachot 1998: 185; 2007: 114).

¹³ Ehrman 2003a: 416-417. The *Didache toon dodeka apostolon* (*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.

¹⁴ In Everett Ferguson (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.

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; 21st Century King James Version). See also: Sachot 2007: 169.

The ‘philosophical’ nature of Early Christianity is already revealed in its terminology: 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 summarized in the *Didachè*.¹⁶ On the level of content, the teaching was first of all a
 5 *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 such doctrinal issues as ‘incarnation,’ ‘resurrection’ nor ‘assumption’; it teaches how to behave in relation to one another (‘in brotherly love’) and to non-christians (‘love those who persecute you’). The only major ‘doctrinal’ issue mentioned at the very end of the text is the
 10 Last Judgment¹⁷, precisely to emphasize the importance of a morally perfect ‘way of life’.

And that way was claimed to be the way of the truth. It was ‘philosophically’ and ‘logically’ defended in what, not incidentally, was called ‘*apologias*’. Unsurprisingly, then, the great majority of the ‘apologists’ of the second century named themselves ‘philosophers’.¹⁸ They were quite clearly schooled in philosophy and claimed
 15 ‘*christianismos*’ to be the ‘true philosophy’ (in contrast to ‘*iudaismos*’ and other ‘*philosophiae*’).¹⁹

A ‘true philosophy’: not one embracing debate among the ‘searchers of truth and wisdom’, but the one pretending to possess the answers to all philosophical debates (applying the Jewish idea of fulfillment – of the Scriptures, of the Messianic expectations – to the
 20 various philosophical questions of that time).²⁰

When this Messianic truth ceased to define itself in reference to philosophy, when Christianity started pretending to be not simply the true philosophy, but a *religio*, and what is more, the ‘true *religio* of the one true God’, things paradigmatically changed. Defining itself as *religio*, “it could no longer consider itself as simply an enclave in the society, as a
 25 particular group [...], [i]t could be but the *religio* of the *societas*, this is to say the *societas* as such, as what signifies itself in its *religio*”.²¹ As *religio* it surpassed the boundaries of a ‘philosophy’, of a ‘way of living’ or a ‘view on the world’. It became a concrete symbolic

¹⁶ Sachot 2007: 239.

¹⁷ Didache XVI; Ehrman 2003a: 440-443; Milavec 2003: 36-37.

¹⁸ Sachot 2007: 253.

¹⁹ ‘True philosophy’ is a common term in the works of Justin, Tatianus, Athenagoras, Theophilus 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 used by Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, for the first time, 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).

²¹ Sachot 1998: 197 (my translation, MDK).

universe affecting every detail of the citizen's life not (only) to the extent that that citizen shared Christianity's particular 'philosophy', but to the extent that he was a citizen. For the (pagan) Romans, there was no religion outside the *religio* of Rome. Similarly, for the christianized *religio* (and/or religionized Christianity), there is no religiosity outside its own domain. However, while the *religio romana* integrated all other religions and appropriated the 'foreign' gods and rituals of the conquered nations, the *religio christiana*, relying on its claim of universal truth, excluded all other religions. Christianity became a 'religiously organized philosophy', surpassing its philosophical paradigm by positing its 'true philosophy' as the 'grammar' of universal citizenship as such.

10 This paradigm shift roughly coincided with the cultural/linguistic shift from Greek to Latin, as it originally occurred 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. Additionally, the intelligentsia in Africa consisted mostly of lawyers rather than philosophers, with a juridical training and background, that shaped
 15 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 Christianity as a religion for the first time in its still young history. (Philosophical) *christianismos* became *religio christiana*: the 'vera religio veri dei'.²² In that passage he defends the "christiani" facing accusations of being "irreligious". Tertullian counters that not they, but the Romans are
 20 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
 25 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 religionem veri dei non modo neglendo], you actually commit the crime of
 30 positive irreligion [in verum committitis crimen verae irreligiositatis]. (*Apologeticum* 24, 1-2)²³

²² Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 24: 2.

²³ Sider 2001: 49; Tertullian 1977: 130.

In the ears of the majority of his contemporaries, Tertullian's use of the words '*vera religio*' (true religion) must have sounded nonsensical.²⁴ For in the eyes of the Romans *religio* had nothing to do with truth. It was a matter of behaving correctly with respect to the gods who did not transcend the existing world. Gods were simply fellow citizens, albeit of an immortal kind.²⁵ The scrupulous²⁶ rituals honoring these gods were essential for maintaining the Roman *res publica*. And since the *urbs* (city) had conquered the *orbis* (surrounding world) and become an empire, the religion was supposed to be able to embrace and include the gods of all its conquered people. For the Romans it made absolutely no sense at all to declare this *religio* 'false', and to substitute it by another one promoted as 'true'.

10 Tertullian was the first Roman citizen to promote the opposite. The translation of *christianismos* into *religio* not only introduced the new criterion 'truth' into the sphere of the *religio*, but truth itself – or at least 'true philosophy' – is now expected to function as *religio* in the inherently 'political' sense of the (Latin) word. Christianity ceased to be *hodos* (way of life) or *Weltanschauung*. It considered itself to be a political institution of universal scope and
15 a candidate to deliver a legitimating 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 Christians and, little more than a century later, became the new paradigm by which Christianity understood itself.

So, in the beginning of the fourth century, when Constantine embraced Christianity, he
20 did this in its quality of *religio*. Most probably, he considered it an excellent candidate to provide the new founding 'ideology' of the Roman Empire. Did Christianity not understand itself as an *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 mankind to be universal?²⁷ "A perfect 'ideology' sustaining the social
25 order of the empire", the emperor may have thought. However, things did not turn out exactly

²⁴ "Philosophy, since this is the generic category in which it was thought in Greek, could certainly have had as object what the Romans? named by the word *religio*. But it could itself not be compared to a *religio*! Tertullian's semantic gesture was therefore not 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 attributed it to." Sachot 2007: 108; my translation, MDK.

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 opposite of *religere* is *negligere*, 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.

the way he and his successors might have envisaged. They had not taken into account that the Christian ‘*civitas perfecta*’ (‘perfect citizenship’) was not meant to be realized in the existing society, but in their own society, in the *agapeic* community they had already shaped and which they were now able to establish 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, already anchored but in the post-apocalyptic, post-eschatological realm, i.e. in heaven, thereby leaving the existing ‘earthly’ society beheaded.²⁸

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

2. A philosophy ...

The segregation between Church and State finds its origin in early Christianity, at the time when it established itself as a ‘philosophical school’. Let us consider 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 to Christianity. There is growing consensus that this text dates back to the late half of the second century, so this letter offers a good summary of how mid-second century Christianity defined itself. And it appears that this is first and foremost as a 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

²⁸ Sachot 2007: 110.

²⁹ For a bilingual edition of the text, see: Erhman 2003: 121-159. The tradition soon gave a name to the author of this *Epistle*: ‘Mathêtès’, Greek for ‘Disciple’ (Costache 2012: 32). It actually underscores Sachot’s observation of how inherently philosophical the Early Christian vocabulary was.

rotted? And another silver, needing someone to guard it, to keep it from being stolen? And another iron, ... [1, 1-2]³⁰

In the subsequent lines, using all of his rhetorical powers, the author repeats in a variety of ways that the gods Diognetus worships are no gods at all. It is obvious here that Christianity enters the scene of its times under the banner of truth: as a ‘philosophical school’ or ‘way of life’, fighting vain illusions. Armed with arguments both philosophical and/or borrowed from Jewish monotheism, it does on a universal scale what the Jews did for their own religious community: proclaiming ‘truth’ as criterion in man’s relation to the divine. But then the letter asks why “the Christians do not worship like the Jews?”

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

According to Christians, 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, then, do the religion-critical Christians behave towards God? What 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

³⁰ Ehrman 2003b: 133.

³¹ Ehrman 2003b: 135.

³² Ehrman 2003b: 137.

expect to be able to learn from any human the mystery of the Christians' own way of worship.
[4, 6]³³

5 And yet, the next sentence does give us some insight. At least, this is 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)

10 What follows is an explanation about Christianity as a universal phenomenon or, more precisely, a universal citizenship:

15 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

20 The Christians have a doctrine, they claim a truth, which has not its origin in mortal humans but in the divine: not pagan gods, but the Only One, True God. How did they worship that God? Since He is universal, there is no specific way of living with that God, no “cities of their own”, no way of “life out of the ordinary”. 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 dichotomy still hallmarking today’s Western politics – emerges in full clarity for the first time:

30 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

³³ Ehrman 2003b: 139.

³⁴ Ehrman 2003b: 139-141.

³⁵ Ehrman 2003b: 141.

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, while living in this world, they honor their God by not ‘really’ living here, by realizing that their home and destiny lies 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 – love, even – the false “homelands” in which they are exiled. Citizens of another world, they do all they can to be 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 that they try to seduce with all kind of religious practices, sacrifices, processions, ceremonies, and other “stupidities”, while they should simply live in the truth, a truth not of this world but nonetheless guiding it, leading it to its salvation. They just should 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 is not of that same world. The *Epistle*’s author continues by putting it “simply”:

³⁶ Ehrman 2003b: 141. Exposure was the most common method of child disposal in Greece and Rome when a newborn child was not accepted by the husband (in cases where the child was e.g. illegitimate, too heavy a burden on the household, physically weak or deformed, not the desired sex, etc)

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
 5 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

How do Christians worship God? Now we understand this way is mysterious, “invisible”. The
 10 Christian practice is similar to the way of the invisible God, giving life to all that is without being a visible element of that life, without being an element of that ‘all’. Thanks to the doctrine that made them open to receive from God, Christians are so to say His representatives, and in that quality they are the soul of the world, giving it *anima*, soul, and - consequently - life.

15 Are the Christians in the *Epistle to Diognetus* ‘religious’? They are certainly religion-critical, it 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 nature of the worship of God, as the *Epistle* puts it. Here, Christianity is presented as a philosophy – and although certainly religiously inspired,
 20 at least in *our* understanding of the word ‘religious’, the text indubitably does not consider Christianity as a ‘religious’ phenomenon. It is a truth claim, a ‘philosophy’, a way of life pretending to be based on an insight in the truth and drawing the practical consequences of that insight.

This type of Christianity is tolerant, understanding , comprehensive compared to other,
 25 different ‘philosophies’, or to anyone who has a different, even hostile view of Christianity. As the Gospel prescribes, it loves those 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)³⁸. Christians respect that there are other philosophies. They say these are wrong, of course, but – as Christians - it suffices to be what we are (representatives of the truth) and
 30 the truth will do what it has to do. The action we can take is to convince others of this truth. Which is what the author of the letter does with regard to Diognetus.

³⁷ Ehrman 2003b: 141-143.

³⁸ Ehrman 2003b: 143.

All this, so to say, remains very much within the boundaries that Plato once set: the soul is the invisible representative of the truth deep inside us, and it is by dialoguing with one another that this truth can emerge. Independent from what we are, what customs, country, ‘religion’ we have, we can let the invisible truth unfold in us. 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 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.

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

3. ... becoming religion

In the *Apology*, one can recognize a similar structure as in the *Epistle to Diognetus*: after a long section of ‘religion critique’, it explains the Christian alternative. However, 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 give a concrete alternative and he does baptize 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 a matter of false gods, of illusions, even dangerous illusions, causing all kinds of violence. But, as we learned earlier in the *Epistle to Diognetus*, Christianity is there to denounce such lies. It is matter of religion critique. Tertullian somewhere ironically 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)³⁹

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,

³⁹ Tertullian 1984: 48-49.

supplying plots and themes for the guilty – unless it is that often the guilty play the parts of the gods. (XV, 4)⁴⁰

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

10 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)⁴¹

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 turn now to expound *our* religion” (XVI, 13, my emphasis, MDK).⁴² Tertullian’s religious critique proposes an alternative, one that he considers to be itself religion as well, a true religion: “*vera religio veri dei*”. On the level of content, by stating this, Tertullian says nothing new, except for the use of the word *religio*. In 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 into one big universal institution spread over the Roman universe and sustaining its entire social and political life. To become *religio*’s alternative, Christianity has to fulfill the same functions, this time in a *true* way. The taking over of those functions – the transition of the Christian ‘philosophy’ to religion – will thoroughly change Christianity.

25 Certainly, it is not Tertullian who reshaped all the functions of *religio* in the Christian way. But by renaming the Christian ‘*secta*’ (‘school’, the common word for Christianity)⁴³ as ‘*religio*’, he laid down the framework for rebuilding the Christian doctrine into a new, universal *religio* sustaining the Roman *civitas*.

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

⁴⁰ Tertullian 1984: 78-79.

⁴¹ Tertullian 1984: 70-71.

⁴² Tertullian 1984: 86-87.

⁴³ Tertullian 1984: 102; see also p. 115; 170, 176, 184, 192, 198.

5 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)⁴⁴

10 This is Christianity as ‘philosophy’ (or, with a term Tertullian uses, as a ‘*disciplina*’, a doctrine in which ‘disciples’ are formed): Christianity as an insight in the truth behind the phenomena. Tertullian refers to “the Greek” for 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 Tertullian’s text, the invisibility is not simply invisible, it is also visible at the same time. In the next sentence we read:

15 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

20

25 This is no less paradoxical than what we read in the *Epistle*, but Tertullian puts the emphasis exactly where the *Epistle* does not. Despite His acknowledged invisible nature, the real emphasis is on God’s visibility. He is “unknown”, but nonetheless “known”. More precisely, He is known *as* the unknown. It is paradoxical, but it is none other than the message of Revelation, the core of 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

30 “not to recognize Him Whom [you] cannot fail to know”.

Like the *Epistle*, Tertullian also uses the metaphor of the “soul”. But here it is not the soul’s hidden nature which is highlighted, the soul as ‘hated by the body that is animated by it’. For Tertullian, the soul is the sense of truth, the sense which, once it succeeds in being

⁴⁴ Tertullian 1984: 86-87.

⁴⁵ Tertullian 1984: 86-87.

what it really is, cannot but *see* the true and (consequently) invisible God. One does not have to logically prove God, for from the moment the soul functions properly, it will reveal God at once – so he writes in the lines immediately following the last quote:

5 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 testimony 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
10 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
15 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)⁴⁶

Christianity is the soul of the world, the *Epistle* stated. But unlike the *Epistle*, Tertullian no longer considers the soul exclusively as a hidden force. It is at the surface of everything and
20 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 is the idea behind Tertullian’s re-definition of Christianity as *religio*. “The soul [is] in its very nature Christian!”, he writes. And so as well is the soul of the world, which is why Christianity is *religio*, i.e. the true force and practice that sustains the world, especially
25 the human world of civilization. For the pagan Romans this force and practice was *religio*; it penetrated every segment of the citizen’s private and public life, founding and at the same time shaping the Empire’s entire political system. The time has come, Tertullian claims, to recognize the *true* force and practice its realization, it is time to acknowledge *religio* in its *truth*, which is to say: to make it Christian.

30 Christianity is not simply a ‘philosophy’ or ‘disciplina’, claiming a truth different from others. Christianity is the truth of *all* those claims, of all ‘philosophies’, a truth which is to be implemented through its general acceptance as *religio vera*. It is the *true* God – the God as revealed to Moses and the Jewish prophets – Who is behind all philosophical truth claims and

⁴⁶ Tertullian 1984: 86-89.

Who now, in the shape of Christian *religio*, has to become the universally recognized Soul of the World. A few pages further Tertullian writes:

5 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
10 must be seen - much as the prophets did. So it can be seen that your laws and your studies alike were fertilized by 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) ⁴⁷

Christianity is the truth of all truths: the truth of Judaism⁴⁸, the truths of the philosophers and
15 of the political founders. Christianity has to introduce this ultimate truth in its *religio*, in order to let it rule the world. Since pagan religion is denounced as delusional, the true religion must take over its function. The Soul that animates the universe can no longer remain hidden, it has to reveal Itself – which for Tertullian means that it has to become *religio*, i.e. to replace Rome's pagan religion.

20 This is why Tertullian vehemently rejects the reproach as if the Christians were not loyal to the Empire and its Emperors. Indeed, Christians did refuse the ritual of sacrifice before the Emperors' statues, which they did not consider as divine. But does this imply they lacked respect for them as highest authority of the Roman Empire? On the contrary. They prayed for them to the *true* God, for they wanted His Empire to be in the hands of the *real*
25 divine power.

Looking up to heaven we 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
30 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) ⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Tertullian 1984: 95.

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.

Where, then, is the ‘split’ we mentioned above, the split making the Christians live *in* the world while being *not of* the world? Careful reading of the text learns that, secretly, it has been transferred to the Romans and planted right in the heart of precisely their religion. Here, Tertullian’s sublime rhetoric does an excellent job. ‘You do to us’, he fulminates against the
 5 Romans, ‘exactly what you do to your sacrificial victims – you cut us up like you slice open the bulls on your altars – and we, Christians, take this upon us and “christianize” that. We allow you to sacrifice us and this way we sacrifice ourselves, but we do this in order to bring the truth to 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
 10 sacrifices. This is why our martyrdom is a genuine praise to the Emperor and can in no way be compared to the flattery of the official rituals in his honor’.⁵⁰

In the lines subsequent to this quote, before declaring the Christians’ martyrdom as a prayer for the Emperor, Tertullian first describes what the Christian prayer is not:

15 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
 20 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)⁵¹

25 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

⁵⁰ For an elaborate study on Early Christian martyrdom, see Jensen 2010.

⁵¹ Tertullian 1984: 153.

⁵² ‘*Immolare*’, ‘*immolatio*’, are the ‘technical’ terms for the killing of the sacrificed animal. “After the *praefatio*, the celebrant moved on to 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).

recognize 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 *of* the world. Already in the *Epistle to Diognetus* we read that this is why they were persecuted, as witnesses 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 sacrificing that they do (i.e. something profoundly religious) and, what is more, that they are 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 their testimony (which is the meaning of ‘martyrdom’: ‘martyrion’ in Greek, martyrion in Latin).

So, even in their expulsion and being butchered by the Roman Empire, Christians prove their profound political loyalty. That is why – as we read a few pages further – they should not be considered as one of the many illegal factions within Roman society that undermine the public interest of that society. But notice the next argument Tertullian 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)⁵³

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, with Tertullian, Christianity did not really lose the ‘*paradoxon*’ we encountered in the *Epistle*.⁵⁴ Yet the case remains that the paradox gave Christianity its final political shape. Given the context, the Christians’ disinterest in the *res publica* stands for their refusal to form their own political faction with a particular agenda, and refusal to participate in political lobbying in the republic’s milieu of power. Precisely that refusal makes them loyal

⁵³ Tertullian 1984: 173.

⁵⁴ Ehrman 2003b: 139-141.

to *universal* politics, to the *res publica* ‘one and indivisible’ – to anachronistically name it with a term from Rousseau.

It is not, in fact, that Christianity cannot be considered as a separate group with its proper way of life. In the chapters that follow, Tertullian explains extensively the properties of
 5 Christian life. But warned 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 this sense that here, the disposition is prepared for Christianity to replace the Roman religion in its function, to become itself that religion.

And this is what happened a little more than a century after Tertullian wrote his
 10 *Apologeticum*. We do not know precisely whether Constantin read the Tertullian text, but he certainly must have had 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, Theodosius’ decree made Christianity the only legal religion, it became *the* religion. Yet, Christian disinterest in the *res publica* remained. Being and feeling fully responsible for the
 15 religiosity and loyal citizenship of all the empire’s inhabitants, Christianity 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 imperfecta* and the heavenly *societas perfecta* – will hence characterize Western politics, and will never be overcome. On the contrary, it will be continuously activated and remain a constitutive element in the driving
 20 forces of Western political life. In one way or another, politics will be lived by citizens who are ‘*in*, but not *of* the world’.

4. Incarnated religion critique

25 In its earlier shape of ‘*hodos*’ (way of life, world-view) 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* society of brotherly love. This is in a nutshell the message
 30 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 not Christianity absorb all the functions once ascribed to Rome’s pagan religion? Where is the genuine monotheistic criticism in the massive ‘Christianization’ of

pagan rites⁵⁵, feasts, and other practices? And, by becoming a Roman (and consequently thoroughly) political religion, did it not turn into the legitimizing narrative sustaining the new empires and their emperors, the medieval kingdoms and royal power of the Middle Ages and, even, the absolutistic monarchs of Early Modern states?

5 It is difficult to refute that assertion. Indeed, Christianity became all too Roman. Not only did it legitimize political power in all its forms for a period reaching into Early Modernity (it could only be stopped abruptly by the French Revolution), it also turned its practice into a real religion, reintroducing a new kind of divine realm to replace what were once ‘the gods’: i.e. the supra-natural sphere of the ‘saints’, through whose advocacy one
10 could reinstall a new religious ‘commerce’, the gift-giving relation with the multiple divine and its grace. Surely, Christian religion had never claimed that one could simply ‘buy’ God’s grace, but neither did it deny 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 the reform movements in the Church’s history – of which the
15 sixteenth century Reformation was but one – fought precisely against these kinds of practices, shows how deeply rooted ‘religion’ was in the old, pagan sense of the word in the people’s culture. And for more than a millennium all kinds of political regimes in the West did use 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’
20 aspect of Christianity lent itself perfectly to that.

 However, Christianity’s religion-critical aspect never remained totally absent in the history of the West. 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 such movements, among which the one led by Francis of Assisi was the most widespread. Despite
25 its enormous success, its anarchistic tendency, however, very soon turned it into one of the strongest law-abiding forces in medieval Christianity. And it is well-known that the sixteenth century Reformation is in direct line with such critical movements and tendencies of the preceding centuries.

 The spirit of criticism is also far from being absent at the Church’s highest levels: even
30 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, the same Church never stopped criticizing that very power. Also here the ‘split’ of ‘being *in*, but

⁵⁵ See Trombley 1993-4.

not *of* the world' showed its importance. Belonging at the same time *to* and *not to* the world, the Church allowed itself 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, obviously motivated primarily by the Church's own interest – just as, similarly, the motives of the earthly powers criticizing the pope's politics were in their own interests as well. The age-long persistence of that conflict, however, proved how deeply this State/Church split became embedded in the very heart of Western political power. On the highest levels of both pontifical and imperial power, no one was ever immune to criticism; and both powers used the Christian doctrine with the same legitimacy to defend their cause. All this kept the spirit of criticism alive at the very heart of power.

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

In a way, the modern citizen is to be considered 'incarnated'. He is *in*, but not *of* the world. At least this is the way he lives. He participates in society, but on a free basis, 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 goal of modern man's political life are located outside this world. No longer a metaphysical or religious outside, but an outside nonetheless. It is from that radically free position that we participate in Modernity's freedom-based society. That position is untenable without a permanent attitude of criticism, for, strictly speaking, it is an impossible position. There simply is no 'outside society'. Therefore society is too much the ground people live by. 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 society is not possible without a constant criticism unmasking that nonetheless inevitable myth. It is in that critical questioning that man finds his most genuine freedom, the free distance he has with respect to the laws that regulate his life, including his social and political life.

It is here that Christianity, and in principle *all* monotheistic religions, must bring in their tradition in order to help construe and maintain modern society. Christianity has age-long experience in dealing with a condition similar to our modern one (being *in* and not *of* the world) and, likewise, it has a tradition 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 shores of the truth it nonetheless refers 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 of dealing with it, but the struggle with that locus is there. Again and again, the truth that Christianity claimed it was turning into reality was used precisely to criticize those so-called realizations. Christianity, in its quality of monotheistic truth-regime, shows the persistence of that indispensable ‘*supplément*’ 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 not 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 ‘supplement of origin’ (*supplément originaire*)⁵⁶ of its truth claim (its criticism) never was and never can be absent, and is to be considered the very locus where its truth finds incarnation.

It is this locus – and the struggle with it – that Christianity has to share with Modernity. It is on the basis 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 of having the truth on its side, with 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 Rimbaud’s imperative saying: “Il faut être absolument moderne”.

⁵⁶ Derrida

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