



Tertullian's moral theology on women and the accusation of misogyny



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Some modern scholars have linked the second century church father, Tertullian, to misogyny. This article wades into the debate over whether Tertullian should be considered a misogynist. Through the combined approaches of historical enquiry and interpretative theory, this article probes the validity of such connections. This article also argues that a consideration of Tertullian's infamous *De cultu feminarum* and prevailing views of gender in the second and third centuries CE establish that he was not a misogynist per se. Rather, the offending comments should be understood as part of his broader moral and theological worldview of his time to call the Christian women to genuine Christian virtues, sobriety, sincerity, and continence.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article provides a reinterpretation of Tertullian's attitude towards women for modern readers. While modern thinkers become shocked of some of his remarks about women, we have shown that a proper understanding of Tertullian's moral theology will change the perception of modern readers, especially on the accusation of misogyny.

Keywords: Tertullian; misogyny; Montanism; virtue; female gender; male gender; *De cultu feminarum*.

Introduction

The writings of Tertullian have offended modern thinkers, particularly on his moral theology of the female gender and behaviour of Christian women in the church. Pierre Darmon, a French specialist in the history of medicine, criticised Tertullian as 'the most misogynist of all times' because of his moral perception of the female gender.¹ In the *Mythologie de la femme dans l'ancienne France (XVIe-XIXe siècle)*, Darmon (1983) wrote:

He is the first one to revive fearlessly the spirit of Isaiah (3, 16–23) and Ezekiel (16, 35–39) in a speech where he denounces with passion the subversive activities of the woman. Because of her fault the man was seduced by the devil, and she broke the alive image of the divinity and sentenced the human race to death. To wash herself of this indelible stain, she should be in mourning for ever, remain covered with rags, and to dedicate herself to an eternal punishment. (pp. 37–38)

The part of the writings of Tertullian that Darmon referred to is contained in the *De cultu feminarum* in which Tertullian made some statements about women that could be disturbing to modern readers. In the opening paragraphs, he wrote:

And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that [forbidden] tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of *your* desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die. (Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum* (On the Apparel of Women), Book I:1–2)

In recent times, a significant number of theologians and feminists have followed Darmon in describing Tertullian's view in *De cultu feminarum* as misogynistic (Edwards 2019:317; Kraemer 1992:162; Noddings 1989:51). Fiorenza (1983:55) has portrayed the theology of Tertullian as one that possesses acute 'misogynist contempt'. Ide (1984:76) has also claimed that Tertullian was the dreadful hater of women among the church fathers. McGuire suggests that Tertullian's hostility towards the female gender showed up in the manner in which women who preached and led religious activities were obnoxious to him (McGuire 1999:264). Other scholars accuse Tertullian of considering the female gender as curse bearers (Knight 1974:120; ed. Ruether 1974:157). By extension, Tavard, Doukhan, and Marga claim that the curse borne by the female gender is the cause of the misery witnessed in all aspects of life (Doukhan 2020:3; Marga 2020:1; Tavard 1973:58, 59). For Still and Wilhite (2013:20),

¹ Darmon was a prolific writer who authored several books including *Le mythe de la procréation à l'âge baroque* (1977), *Le tribunal de l'impuissance* (1979), *Mythologie de la femme dans l'ancienne France (XVIe-XIXe siècle)* (1983) and many others.

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Tertullian's statements that the female gender was the 'gateway of the devil' and 'a temple built over a sewer' were enough to crystallise misogynistic thought in Christianity.

A number of apologetic claims have arisen to defend Tertullian's attitude of the female gender. Notable scholars who have questioned the linkage of Tertullian to misogyny include F. Forrester Church (1975), Elizabeth Carnelley (1989), and Barbara Finlay (2003). In accordance with such a sympathetic attitude towards Tertullian's conception of the female gender, the current study suggests that the relation of Tertullian to misogyny is totally misconstrued. Claims that he was a misogynist result from out-of-context interpretations by modern audience. When properly understood, the second century theologian comes to the fore as one who respected women and advocated a way for them to escape the victimised outlook that has been ascribed them by the socio-historical settings of Tertullian's days.

In this regard, the conclusion of this article aligns with Finlay's (2003:503–525) view in her 'Was Tertullian a misogynist? A reconsideration'. Like her, the present article explores the prevailing attitude towards the female gender in Tertullian's period as well as the influence of Montanism on Tertullian's theological discourses. However, the present study deviates from any subtle link between Tertullian and the misogyny or any of its variants. Where Finlay (2003:511, 508) sees traces of androcentric theories in the writings of Tertullian, the current study claims that the elements of androcentrism, misogyny, and patriarchy observable in Tertullian's writings reflect the prevailing perception of the female gender in Tertullian's immediate socio-historical milieu. Even in this socio-historical context, Tertullian's attitude towards women deviates from the norm, making the claims of misogyny inconceivable, and hereby contested.

To authenticate these claims, the present study has offered a historical inquiry and conceptual analysis to rethink the claims of Tertullian's ties with misogyny. Firstly, the article presents a brief biography of the second century Church Father. Secondly, the article probes the prevalent perception of the female gender in the second and third centuries during the Common Era. Thirdly, the article examines the specific ways by which Montanism influenced the theological discourses of Tertullian. Fourthly, the article inquires the meaning, nature, and development of misogyny from antiquity to the present time. These historical levels will provide the basis for exploring the way Tertullian's primary audience understood and interpreted his views in *De cultu feminarum* and other works about the female gender. Finally, the present study suggests a conceptual reconstruction of Tertullian's views on the gender of women.

About Tertullian of Carthage

The biography of Tertullian is gathered from fragmented documents of other authors because he himself never spent

the time to write about himself (Henne 2011:29, 30).² It is believed that his engagement in doctrinal apologetics, which is of vast work in his book the *Apology*, did not permit him to focus on himself in his writings (Henne 2011:29). Therefore, writing about his life must be done with great caution because of such obscurity.

It has been commonly accepted that Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, who is often called Tertullian, was born in Carthage in Northern Africa (Munier 1996:11). His date of birth is not certain. Timothy David Barnes situates it to around 170–212 (Barnes 1971:57–59). Others similar to Phillippe Henne and Charles Munier believe that he was born between 150 and 160 or perhaps a later period (Henne 2011:31; Munier 1996:11). Jerome of Stridon accounted that Tertullian was a presbyter whose father was a Roman proconsular centurion probably stationed in Northern Africa by the government (Jerome, *De viris illustribus*, 53). He continued to say that Tertullian was always attached to his home life and he was probably a very popular personality (Jerome, *De viris illustribus*, 53; Henne 2011:31). Eusebius gave a record that Tertullian was trained in law upon his arrival in Rome (Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.2.4).

Tertullian was not raised in a Christian home. He was raised in a home deeply rooted in pagan practices (Tertullian 1997:18). His conversion into Christianity was in the later part of the 2nd century. The conversion gave him the privilege to connect with the Greek Church. He also encountered Jewish traditions, Gnosticism, Marcionism and Montanism (Tertullian 1997:20). Tertullian took great sympathy with Montanism which he strongly defended (Tertullian 1997:20–22). There is no evidence in his writings which suggest that Tertullian left the mainstream church to Montanism. Montanism was rather a movement that emerged in the church of which Tertullian was much engaged with (Rankin 1995:27–38, 41).

Tertullian is considered as a prolific, rhetorical, and logical writer. He wrote about 31 extant treatises in Latin. About 15 of his works cited by other writers are lost.³ He is considered as the creator of the Latin theological language (Henne 2011:45). His first book was written in Latin after his conversion (Henne 2011:46). His mastery of the Latin made him invent many theological vocabularies. He became an innovator of theological lexicons and theological concepts. He created the terms *incorruptela*, *incorruptibilitas* and *trinitas* and gave more sense to the terms *unio* (*uniom*) and *unitas* (community/unity) (Henne 2011:47–48).

Tertullian was not a systematic theologian. Most of his writings are reactive and apologetic. One cannot also attribute to him a specific area of writing. He wrote on various topics ranging from ecclesiastical to social issues. His works could

2. Early writers such as Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.*, II, 2, 4; Jerome, *Vir. ill.*, 53; and Vincent of Lerins in his *Commonitorium* give some information about Tertullian and his works.

3. Lost works, viewed 28 September 2021, from http://www.tertullian.org/works_lost.htm.

be divided into three main parts, namely, (1) against unbelievers, (2) against heretics and heretical ideas, and (3) Christian living and contemporary issues.

Tertullian wrote extensively on women. He can be credited with four major works on women: *On the Apparel of Women*, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, *To His Wife*, and *On Exhortation to Chastity*. There are other scanty comments about women in some of his other writings, especially in his *Prescription Against Heretics*. His major works on women are summarised here:

***Ad uxorem* (The Letter to His Wife)**

This is the only work of Tertullian that describes about the morality of marriage. He wrote this probably between 197 and 206 (Henne 2011:229). From the beginning, Tertullian stated his purpose for writing the letter:

I have thought it meet, my best beloved fellow-servant in the Lord, even from this early period, to provide for the course which you must pursue after my departure from the world, if I shall be called before you; (and) to entrust to your honor the observance of the provision. (Tertullian, *Ad uxorem* [To His Wife], Book 1:1)

This first sentence revealed the whole idea that Tertullian was willing to communicate in his treatise. Firstly, Tertullian's usage of the phrase *dilectissime mihi* (my beloved or dear) explains his gentleness and affection towards his life partner. Secondly, the phrase *in Domino conserua* (a fellow servant in the Lord) expressed a union that found its fellowship in the Lord and the Christian faith. From these two perspectives, he built his argument that (1) marriage should be guided by moral affection and (2) the recommendation that marriage should be a union between two people of the same faith.

***De cultu feminarum* (On the Apparel of Women)**

This is probably the most criticised book. But his motive in this book differs completely from how modern readers interpret his views in this book. Tertullian made an argument that women's lives should be guided by the practice of faith in the value of heavenly things other than earthly. He called for the attention of women to the most essential element of the Christian faith. While he began fiercely from the beginning, his latter arguments were more pedagogic. His compassionate salutation of using the same phrase *sorores dilectissimae* (beloved/dear sisters) suggests his brotherly connection with the women in the treatise. People who read this book should appreciate it based on the merits of its context and the merits of its valuable instruction on women's modesty in the practice of Christian faith.

***De monogamia* (On Monogamy)**

In this treatise, Tertullian posed the question of monogamy and remarriage of widows. But instead of being more catholic, he takes his methodology from Montanism. While his *De Exhortatione Castitatis* seems to be condemning marriage, here, he reaffirms the legitimacy of marriage. Even

though some may see him as struggling with the subject, Tertullian made a case for marriage and remarriage. His views in this treatise coalesce with his recommendation to his wife to remarry upon his demise. Tertullian suggested this in his *To His Wife*. In this treatise, he refutes the heretical teaching that only bishops should be monogamous.

***De virginibus velandis* (On the Veiling of Virgins)**

In this treatise, Tertullian makes a moral argument that both married and unmarried women must veil their heads. What was important in this treatise was the fact that he made an argument from different cultures of the world. For him, because the veil was a sign of submission, married women ought to wear it. Similarly, he entreated the unmarried women to veil because they belonged to Christ. Tertullian was more elaborate on this subject in this treatise than he did in others. He finally made a conclusion that if women refuse to put on the veil, it is not only pride but also against the order of God, which he has put in nature.

Perception of women in the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the common era

This section explores the dominant Christian perception of the female gender during the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the Common Era. Inferences have been drawn from the views of Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. For obvious reasons, Tertullian's views on women have been excluded. A major section has been given to the analysis of his views on the female gender.

Generally, the church fathers conceived of the female gender as the origin of sin, 'lust', and rebellion (Barr 2021; Ranke-Heinemann 1990:185). Women were frequently considered as a reminder of the shame of licentious lust. The church fathers thought that suppressing the thoughts, activities, and emotional expressions of the female gender was a divinely sanctioned undertaking.

Two factors might have accounted for this repressive conception of the female gender. Firstly, the emergence of Christianity within the Hellenistic-Roman world meant that some elements of culture and social perception subtly permeated the central elements of Christianity. Of prime importance was the influence of Platonism and Aristotelianism (Doukhan 2020:3). The application of Plato's concept of dualism justified the superiority of men over women (Yen 2002:1). Aristotle's conception of women as deformed men, 'inferior beings', and 'defective beings' with a persistent lack of intellect and physical fitness established a negative pattern of thinking about the female gender. Following Platonism and Aristotelianism, the church fathers portrayed a master-servant or a superior-subject relationship in which the masculine gender was assigned the role of the master or the superior (Ruether 2011:65).

Secondly, allegorical and literal interpretations given to portions of the Bible solidified the view that the female gender was ontologically inferior to the masculine gender (Doukhan 2020:3; Lerner 1993:14). Biblical passages in the Old Testament that were interpreted this way included Genesis 1:27; 2:18, 20–23; and 3:1–24. Portions of the New Testament text that was similarly interpreted included 1 Corinthians 14:33–35; 11:7–9; and Ephesians 5: 22–23.

Following the pattern of feminine inferiority, Irenaeus considered women generally as the cause of sin and the subsequent alienation of humanity from God. However, he emphasised that Mary's piety was far more important than Eve's curse. For him, the 'virgin Mary' has redeemed all women from the sinful innate lust of the female gender (Sawyer 1996:157). After the same pattern, Clement of Alexandria proposed that God took away the weakness of Adam and used it to create Eve. For this reason, he considered women as weak, limited, passive, 'castrated', 'immature', 'licentious, and unjust' (Ide 1984:66).

Origen was the guiltiest and extremist in the adherence of the church fathers to this pejorative pattern regarding the female gender. His hostility towards women finds expression in his abhorrence of marital sexual intercourse (Ranke-Heinemann 1990:51, 52). He attributed qualitative superiority to the masculine gender claiming it was directly constituted of the *imago Dei*. His description of women as lustful beings 'worse than animals' summarises his hostility towards the female gender (Weinrich 1991:258).

Although the Hellenistic-Roman world affected the conceptions of the church fathers on the female gender, some of them used undue pejorative descriptions of women who easily lean towards misogyny and androcentrism (Seitkasimova 2019:49, 51, 53). However, the context in which they wrote describes a notion of doubts about the sincerity of the female gender. In reflecting the dominant views about women, the church fathers shared the mixed feelings they had concerning the female gender. This notwithstanding, their ambivalence eventually developed into a line of pejorative thoughts concerning the female gender that later writers explored in their misogynistic or androcentric expositions of women across the centuries (cf. Ide 1991:96; Lerner 1993:141; Ruether 1983:167).

Influence of Montanism on Tertullian

Alternatively known as New Prophecy or *Cataphrygian*, Montanism refers to a 2nd century movement within Christianity that mainly emphasised ecstatic prophecy, the dependence on the Holy Spirit as the promised *paraklete*, and a rigorous ethical system (McKechnie 2019:9). It was named after its founder, Montanus (eds. Newcombe & Harvey 2016:64). Popular scholasticism suggests that Montanus was a new Christian convert who started his prophetic utterances in Ardabau (Tabbernee 2009:12, 19). Together with Prisca/Priscilla and Maximilla, Montanus claimed prophetic affinity

from the timeline of Phillip's daughters and Agabus, through to Quadratus and Ammia of Philadelphia (Tabbernee 2009:37, 40, 41, 89).

As Montanism spread from Asia Minor to Western Europe and Northern Africa, it became established in Carthage. It was here that Tertullian encountered the New Prophecy and subsequently became one of its important adherents at the beginning of the 3rd century in the Common Era (Trevett 2002:13, 14). From c. 207CE Tertullian expressed Montanist sentiments by allowing genuine women to prophesy in the church in Carthage. Additionally, he subscribed to and further recommended the ascetic lifestyle of Montanism (Trevett 2002:43). His strong advocacy of Montanist teaching has been the occasion for the notion that he willfully abandoned his priestly duty in the Catholic Church to join the Montanists' sect.

In addition to the initial proposition that Montanist practices were kept under moderation in Carthage, ecclesiastical records indicate that Tertullian became an avowed Trinitarian Catholic Christian (González 1984:159–161). Adherents of Montanism admirably referred to themselves as '*spiritales* (spiritual people)' and derogatorily referred to non-members as '*psychici* (natural people)' (Tabbernee 2009:110).

Common themes that formed the ethos of Montanism included ecstatic prophesying, the ability of prophets and martyrs to forgive sins, belief in the imminent second coming of Jesus, the inclusion of women in church leadership roles, the sacredness of martyrdom, and a strong ascetic emphasis that rigorously required fasting (Ash 1976:236; ed. Calcagno 2016:185; Epiphanius 49.2.5; cf. Placher 1983:50; Searl-Chapin 2016:36; Tabbernee 2009:13–15, 91, 123). Also, they prohibited impressive appearances and forbade remarriage both after divorce and the demise of one's spouse (Tabbernee 2009:13–15). They believed that widows and widowers had a sacred duty to dedicate their lives to only ecclesiastical duties (eds. Newcombe & Harvey 2016:65).

Montanism affected Tertullian in several ways (McKechnie 2019:112). Firstly, he believed that all sincere Christians ought to live after God's *disciplina*. Secondly, he suggests that a marked evidence of a sincere Christian lifestyle is a Holy Spirit endorsed continence. With this virtue, Tertullian taught that the Christian could put ungodly and corrupt carnal desires of the body under absolute subjection (Fiorenza 1983:55). Thirdly, he promoted ascetic lifestyle as that which was pleasing to God (Finlay 2003:507). Accordingly, he claimed that the intent to appeal to other individuals hinders the Christian's spiritual development. His *De cultu feminarum* is an obvious expression of the extent to which Tertullian was influenced by Montanists' disciplinary views.

Origin and development of the concept of misogyny

From the Greek *μισογυνία* (*misogunia*), the term misogyny refers to a patterned thought, behaviour, and emotional

expression that exhibit bitterness, hostility, and inferiority towards the female gender (Bloch 2021:1–3). The earliest usage of the term appears in Greek classics. In his day, Euripides was described as a hater of exponents of misogynism (Deming 2004:224). Similarly, both Chrysippus and Antipater regarded individuals with misogynic tendencies as infirmed. They claimed that a healthy individual will maintain an absolute balance between ‘philogyny and misogyny, philanthropy, and misanthropy’ (Salles 2005:485). Aristotle and Socrates, however, have been described as misogynists (Ruether 1985:65).

Scholars have resorted to two main theories in their attempt to understand the origin of misogynistic attitudes. These are the traditional anthropologists’ view and the feminist anthropologists’ view. The traditional anthropologists’ view justifies male chauvinism on grounds that the female gender is ontologically expected to be subordinated under the masculine gender (Lerner 1993:16). In contrast, feminist anthropologists claim that male supremacy has never been supported by creation. Instead, male chauvinism emerged from social, economic, and historical factors that affected the original status of the relationship between the sexes (Ehrenberg 1989:176; Smith 2013). Some feminist anthropologists postulate that female chauvinism predates male supremacy (eds. Davis & Farge 1993; Gimbutas 1991; Ruether 1983). Like Marcus Tullius Cicero, these feminist anthropologists believe that fear caused the masculine gender to wrestle power from the female gender (Cicero 4:11).

The stance taken on the origin of misogynistic attitude towards the female gender in this study is a modified version of the viewpoint of the feminist anthropologists. It is believed that the initial relationship between the genders was characterised by mutualism (Peletz 2009:95). However, the theological explanation of how sin and rebellion entered the created order, perpetrated by various religions, especially the three Abrahamic religions, caused the masculine gender to be suspicious of the female gender. This suspicion eventually developed the notion that the only way to trust women was to control their way of thinking, behaviour, and the expression of their feelings. The emphasis on the masculine gender as the ruler of the sexes enunciated a struggle between the genders. To curb these gender-based struggle and to ensure the maintenance of male chauvinism, men grounded their feelings of superiority and subjugation of women in sacred literature (ed. Cade 1970:103, 198).

Consequently, interpretations given to some religious documents portrayed the female gender as sinful. The Christian religion, for example, has many passages that have received such long-standing interpretations from notable adherents. For this reason, many passages of the Bible have been interpreted to lend support to the suppression of women in religious services. A similar trend is observable in non-religious literature. Generally, an assessment of the literature that has been passed from generation to generation will seem to suggest that few or no woman writers or heroes ever

existed. Instead, the works and exploits of men are highlighted. Even in this preserved literature, the comprehensive role of the female gender has been either ignored or stereotyped (Pleck & Sawyer 1974:7, 8).

This attitude of male supremacy over women manifests in different ways at different times and in different situations. Depending on social historical settings, misogyny has manifested in the form of patriarchal, androcentric, machismo, and economic systems (Siapera 2019:24, 28, 32). These social systems have been the basis of the derogation of women in the history of humanity, either directly or indirectly or in both ways. Some of the ways in which women have been oppressed include gender discrimination, social exclusion, the suttee system in India, female circumcision in Africa, Malaysia, and some countries in the Middle East, and witch-burning. Hence, misogyny does not only suggest male chauvinist thoughts.

Rather, it describes an individual, male or female (in the case of internalised misogyny), who considers the male gender superior to the female gender and expresses such considerations in ways that oppress or marginalise the female gender (Bearman, Korobov & Thorne 2009:10). To claim Tertullian was a misogynist is to accuse the 2nd century church father of being a woman-hater and an instigator of unspoken oppression and atrocities against the women population of his church in Carthage. In contrast to any proof of this, historical records show that he had close fellowship with women of his congregation (Finlay 2003:508).

Reconstructing Tertullian’s attitude towards the female gender

As already indicated, a misogynist is someone who hates prejudices or has biases towards women. It comes in so many ways such as denigration of women, violence against women or ideological warfare against women. If Tertullian is accused of being a misogynist, it means that he launched an ideological bias or warfare against women with the sole intention to denigrate and make them lose value. In this section, the article examines the accusation of misogyny in the larger context of Tertullian’s writings.

Sociological and theological contexts

As seen from our previous analysis, Tertullian wrote within a period when both the society and the church considered women as subordinates to men. Even though the idea of equality existed in the theological frontline, there were still social disparities between men and women. Clarke noted that Tertullian’s theology on women was partly influenced by the apostle Paul (Clark 1983:15–18).

The basis of Tertullian’s argument

Most scholars who accuse Tertullian of misogyny often refer to the *De cultu feminarum* where Tertullian calls women the ‘Devil’s gateway’. Even though the current study recognises

Tertullian's strong linguistic posture and rhetoric in the *De cultu feminarum*, and his tendency to create an *Eve-ontology* in the female gender, the accusation of misogyny would be an out-of-context interpretation. Taking the *De cultu feminarum* in its larger context and relation to other writings of Tertullian on women, it is affirmed that Tertullian was a moralist whose casuistic theological dogma about women was meant to uphold commendable moral aptitude. The moral theology of Tertullian in this treatise, therefore, is one of the inescapable themes when carefully read in its larger context.

In the *De cultu feminarum*, Tertullian drew the attention of women to the sinful nature. This sinfulness comes because of the Fall in which the woman became an instrument of deception and the fall of man.⁴ But Tertullian does not present women as satanic. Instead, he presents women as the 'Devil's gateway', which is made possible because of elaborate ornamental jewellery and profane dressing. Tertullian called these as *cultus* and *ornatus*. It is the *cultus* which included gold, silver, earrings, apparel and *ambitio* that contradicts Christian humility/modesty. The *ornatus*, which included hairdressing and body care, attracts attention (Tertullian 1971:21–22). Tertullian considered both *cultus* and *ornatus* as satanic and akin to the standards of unchristian women. Tertullian focuses on revealing the corruptible nature of these elements mainly from chapters 5 to 90. He suggests that the perception of the role that Eve played in the Fall should induce women to be humbler in their appearances and outlooks. Tertullian hopes that women shall escape the derogatory perception that the society had of them, through sobriety, sincerity, and continence.

Tertullian's audience

Tertullian's treatment of women's adornment is about how Christian women could live in accordance with Christian standards. At least he was not writing to worldly women. As indicated earlier, he wrote to *sorores dilectissimae* and *ancillae Dei* (handmaids of God). It appears that these women were new converts who needed to be taught Christian standards (Tertullian 1971:43). At other times, he counselled Christian men on the need for modesty in dressing and appearance (Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum*, II:8; *De Corona* 5, 8). There is a good reason to question that this affectionate salutation on its own – especially a ritualised one – does not prove anything to exonerate Tertullian from being a misogynist. But it is also true that such affectionate salutation is not a hallmark of a misogynist, unless otherwise proven sarcastic. From his rhetoric, Tertullian did not write out of misogyny.

Tertullian and the figure of Eve

Tertullian employed the figure of Eve as the gateway of sin. This allusion was not used by Tertullian to denigrate women. Rather, the discourse of Tertullian gives evidence that Eve became a vehicle of temptation that led to the fall of Adam. Tertullian postulated the fact that one's action can mislead

4. Elsewhere, Tertullian blames Adam for the Fall of humanity (cf. Tertullian 1959:15, 44).

the other into temptation. Hence, he encouraged women to be modest. He made it clear when he interrogated:

But why are we a (source of) danger to our neighbour? Why do we import concupiscence into our neighbor?... Are we to paint ourselves out that our neighbours may perish? Where, then, is (the command), 'Thou shall love thy neighbour as thyself?' 'Care not merely about your own (things), but (about your) neighbor's?' (Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum* II:2, 2)

This was in support of an earlier point he had made about the fall of holy angels (Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum* II:1, 2). Tertullian also made a similar assertion in the *De corona* that:

For what is a crown on the head of a woman, but beauty made seductive, but mark of utter wantonness, – a notable casting away of modesty, a setting temptation on fire? (Tertullian, *De corona*, XIV)

To avoid tempting men which leads to adultery and prostitution, women must learn to put their adorning passion under control. Finlay (2003) has noted that:

For Tertullian, women's modesty was required in part to protect brothers, sons, and husbands from the mortal sin of lust. He not only saw feminine beauty and adornment as dangerous, but also as unnecessary vanity. Hence, women's 'immodest' dress was inexcusable. (p. 510)

Tertullian in opposition to paganism

The *De cultu feminarum* must not be seen as the only place where Tertullian stands against women's immodesty. In fact, it is not about women, but it is about the practice of paganism. In *De spectaculis*, Tertullian advises Christians to stay away from pagan amusement. He wrote:

[T]he rejection of these amusements is the chief sign to them that a man has adopted the Christian faith. If any one, then, puts away the faith's distinctive badge, he is plainly guilty of denying it. What hope can you possibly retain in regard to a man who does that? When you go over to the enemy's camp, you throw down your arms, desert the standards and the oath of allegiance to your chief: you cast in your lot for life or death with your new friends. (Tertullian, *Spectaculis*, XXIV)

Tertullian's moral theology should be seen as one that draws people from the clutches of the world into the glory of Christian virtue. He admonished Christian women to array themselves after the directives of God and not after the beliefs of the Hellenistic-Roman world (Ellingsen 2015:61). Unfortunately, his critics and other modern readers have polarised most of his writings in support of misogyny. The sum of Tertullian's theological works on the female gender is a call to authentic Christian moral identity.

Summary and conclusion

Looking at the various meanings attached to misogyny, one can hardly call Tertullian a misogynist. There is not enough evidence to prove that Tertullian was a misogynist, at least from the socio-historical context of his day. Tertullian emphasised the value of Christian virtue with a higher degree of holiness. His writings urged women to be modest

instead of satisfying the ungodly expectations of society. His rejection of *cultus* and *ornatus* was to affirm *humilitas*. For Tertullian, these ornaments were avenues that the Satan leads women astray. Tertullian pointed out that these outward ornaments led to *prostitutio*, the opposite of Christian *castitas*. Although his rhetoric poses many theological questions from the perspective of the modern reader, his overall arguments on women and Christian modesty must be appreciated in their proper context.

It could be seen that Tertullian was influenced by both his society and the theological lineage of the apostles and theologians before him. Both Paul and Peter called women to the same Christian mode of virtue the way Tertullian did. Like them, he used strong rhetoric that could easily be swayed into misogynistic tendencies. He developed his theological admonition from a socio-historical context that marginalised the female gender. But Tertullian was always gentle to women. He addressed them as dearly beloved of the Lord.

Tertullian thinks that women do not belong to the devil. They are saved by the Lord just like all men. His gentle approach reflects his heartfelt commitment to the ministry of saving women from the dungeons of paganism. As a presbyter, he demonstrated his authority to nurture his church members, of which women were part.

Tertullian does not subvert the activities of women. Instead, he subverts their tendency to be swayed away by paganism. It is true that because of their fault, Adam was seduced by the devil. According to Tertullian, women can still be an avenue to tempt men; therefore, they must control their adornment in such a way that it does not cause further temptation and the fall of men. Tertullian never made an assertion that the male gender was to control the female gender. Again, he did not argue that women must wear mourning clothes or cover themselves with rags as penitence for their sins. Unfortunately, such conceptions are distortions of Tertullian's views about the female gender. He appealed to women to adorn themselves with the spirit of Christian humility in order not to provoke more temptations. He called for their alertness to self and to think of the salvation of others as well. Describing Tertullian as a misogynist in the modern day is an insincere way to interpret his genuine views on women. Darmon, and others like him, subverted passages of Tertullian to make unfounded conclusions. Thinking of the misconstruction that may surround his works, Tertullian once wrote:

[T]his is the usual way with perverse and ignorant heretics; yes, and by this time even with Psychics universally: to arm themselves with the opportune support of someone ambiguous passage, in opposition to the disciplined host of sentences of the entire document. (Tertullian, *De pudicitia*, XVI:24)

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