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TERTULLIAN: THE ARGUMENT FROM SCRIPTURE

*Christians were not the first to attack idols. The Old Testament prohibited them and even forbade the making of a likeness. This view was emphatically reiterated by Tertullian. His Treatise On Idolatry, which was written for a Christian audience, does not deal with idolatry as its title proposes, but with a more limited question. Can an artist, a maker of images and likenesses, be a Christian? Tertullian denies this passionately. At the same time he must acknowledge that artists are not only admitted into the church but into the priesthood as well. The bitter tone of Tertullian's attack seems to imply that he wrote against well established habits and that the church by 200 was accustomed to tolerate images as well as their makers. It is highly unlikely that a priest or any other Christian should have produced idols for pagan patrons, as Tertullian seems to imply. But for Tertullian there was no difference between an idol and a likeness. Scripture forbade both. Since every likeness, even that of an animal, might become the object of an idolatrous cult, it was mere sophistry to introduce a distinction between the two. For a Christian who had the misfortune to be also an artist Tertullian had only one piece of advice: he must give up art and become a simple workman.*

For some time in the past there existed no idol. Before the makers of this monster had risen up like mushrooms, there were only temples and the sanctuaries were empty, as in some places traces of the old state of affairs have maintained themselves even to our day. Yet idolatry was practised, not under that name but in actual fact, for also in our day it may be practised outside a temple and without an image. But as soon as the devil had brought into the world the makers of statues, portraits and every kind of representation, that practice so pernicious to man, which was still in a primitive stage, received from the idols both its name and its development, and then accordingly every form of art producing an idol in whatever way became a source of idolatry. . . .

Both the making and the worship of an idol are forbidden by God. Insofar as the making of a thing precedes its worship, so far, if the worship is unlawful, the prohibition of its making logically precedes the prohibition of its worship. For this reason, that is, in order to root out the material occasion of idolatry, the Divine Law proclaims: "you shall make no idol," and by adding to this: "nor a likeness of the things which are in heaven and which are on earth and which are in the sea,"<sup>1</sup> it has denied to the servants of God the practice of these arts to the whole world. For

had not he<sup>2</sup> gone before who prophesied this, that namely the demons and the spirits, that is the apostate angels, would employ all elements, everything belonging to the world, everything that the heaven, the sea and the earth contain, for idolatrous purposes, in order that these things should be consecrated against God instead of God Himself? Everything, therefore, is worshipped by human error except the Creator of everything Himself. The images of these things are idols, the consecration of the images is idolatry.

Every offence committed by idolatry must of necessity be imputed to every maker of every idol. Thus in his threat the same Enoch forejudges at the same time both the worshippers and the makers of an idol: "And again I swear to you, sinners, that unrighteousness has been prepared for the day of the destruction of blood. You, who serve stones and who make images of gold and silver and wood and stone and clay and serve ghosts and demons and spirits in sanctuaries and all errors, not according to knowledge, you will not find any help among them!" Further Isaiah says: "you are My witnesses whether there is a God except Me. And at that time there did not exist those who model and sculpt, all vain fools, who make things to their liking which will not avail them." And the whole subsequent pronouncement execrates makers and worshippers alike; it ends up with: "know that their heart is ashes and earth and that nobody can deliver his own soul."<sup>3</sup> Where David equally includes the makers, he says: "may such become those who make these things."<sup>4</sup> And why should I, a man of limited memory, suggest anything more, remind you of anything more from Scripture? As if either the voice of the Holy Spirit were not sufficient, or as if it deserved any further consideration, whether the Lord has in advance cursed and damned the makers of those things, of which He curses and damns the worshippers.

... If no law of God had forbidden us to make idols, if not a single pronouncement of the Holy Spirit threatened the makers of idols no less than their worshippers, even then we should infer simply from our sacrament of baptism that such forms of art are contrary to our faith. For how have we renounced the devil and his angels if we make them? What repudiation have we pronounced against them, I do not say: with whom, but on whom we live? What discord have we affected with them to whom we are bound for the sake of our subsistence? Can you deny with your tongue what you profess with your hands? Demolish with words what you build up in deed? Preach one God whereas you make so many? Proclaim the true God whereas you make false ones? "I make and do not worship," someone says. As if there were any reason for which he dare not worship

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian is referring here to Enoch, and citing the apocryphal book of Enoch 19: 1-3, which he regards as Scripture.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 44: 8, 9, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Psalms 115: 8.

except that one, for which he also should not make, that is, the offense to God in both cases. On the contrary, it is exactly you who worship, since you make worship possible....

Each day the zeal of the faith might speak at length complaining about the following point: that a Christian comes from the idols into the church, comes from the worship of the enemy into the house of God, raises to God the father the hands that are the mothers of idols, prays to Him with the very hands whose works outside are prayed to against God, touches the Lord's body with those hands which give a body to the demons. Even this is not enough! It would be still too little if they would receive from other hands what they defile; no, they even transmit to others what they have defiled: makers of idols are chosen into the ecclesiastical order. What a crime! The Jews have only once laid violent hands on Christ, but they illtreat His body daily. O hands deserving to be cut off! It is immaterial to me if this has been said as a similitude: "if your hand scandalizes you, you cut it off."<sup>5</sup> What hands are more worthy to be cut off than those in which the body of the Lord is scandalized?

Of course I shall take special care to answer the excuses of this kind of artist, who should never be admitted to the house of God.... Straightaway those words which are usually raised as an objection: "I have nothing else to live by," can be severely retorted: "so you must live? What have you to do with God, if you live according to your own laws?"... If the necessity of maintenance is extended so far, then the arts may offer some other branches providing the means to live without a transgression of the discipline, that is without the making of an idol. The stucco worker also knows how to mend buildings and make plaster-work and to polish a cistern and trace ogees and to variegate the appearance of walls by way of many other decorations apart from images. Both a painter and a marblemason and a bronze-worker and any engraver know extensions of their trade belonging to their own province and which are at any rate much easier. For whoever designs an image, how much more easily does he plaster a panel! Who carves a Mars from lime-wood, how much more quickly does he put together a chest! There is no art which is not either the mother or the relative of another. Nothing is without connection with something else. The ramifications of the arts are as numerous as the desires of men. "But as to the payment and wages there is a difference!" Likewise there is a difference in labour. A smaller reward is made good by the fact that the work is done more often. How many walls ask for pictures? How many temples and chapels are built for idols? Dwellings on the other hand, and country houses and baths and tenement houses in how great numbers! A shoe and a sandal are gilded daily, a Mercury and a Serapis not daily. Luxury and ostentation will surely be sufficient to the

his ever present energy: in the thunder and the lightning, in the thunder-bolt or the clear sky. It is no cause for wonder if you see not God; wind and storm drive, toss, disorder all things, yet the eyes see not wind and storm. We cannot look upon the sun, which is to all the cause of vision; its rays dazzle our eyesight; the observer's vision is dimmed, and if you look too long all power of sight is extinguished. How could you bear the sight of the author of the sun itself, the fountain of light, when you turn your face from his lightnings and hide from his shafts? do you expect to see God with the eyes of the flesh, when you can neither see nor lay hold of your own soul, the organ of life and speech?

earnings of handicrafts, and at any rate they are more frequent than any form of superstition. Dishes and cups will rather be desired by ostentation than by superstition. Wreaths, too, are more used by luxury than by religious ceremonies.<sup>6</sup>

MINUCIUS FELIX: A PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENT (c. 200)

Unlike Tertullian's treatise On Idolatry, Minucius Felix's Octavius was written for pagan readers. Its setting is idyllic: a discussion of religion on the beaches of Ostia by three friends. Two of them are Christians, and the third a pagan soon to be converted. The language and the arguments are carefully chosen to appeal to a cultivated non-Christian audience. There are no quotations from Scripture, and nowhere in the dialogue is mention made of Christ. Minucius Felix's remote Godhead, which can neither be seen nor represented, is the god of a philosopher rather than the god who took human form in Christ. This incongruence troubled neither Minucius nor other Christian writers, who, like him, were eager to absorb those strains of pagan speculation that were critical of image worship.

Do you suppose we conceal our objects of worship because we have no shrines and altars? What image can I make of God, when, rightly considered, man is an image of God? What temple can I build for him, when the whole universe, fashioned by his handiwork, cannot contain him? Shall I, a man, housed more spaciouly, confine within a tiny shrine power and majesty so great? Is not the mind a better place of dedication? our inmost heart, of consecration? Shall I offer to God victims and sacrifices which he has furnished for my use, and so reject his bounties? That were ingratitude, seeing that the acceptable sacrifice is a good spirit and a pure mind and a conscience without guile. He who follows after innocence makes a prayer to God; he who practises justice offers libations; he who abstains from fraud propitiates; he who rescues another from peril slays the best victim. These are our sacrifices, these our hallowed rites; with us justice is the true measure of religion.

But you say, the God we worship we neither show nor see. Nay, but herein is the ground of our belief that we can perceive him, though we cannot see. For in his works, and in the motion of the universe, we behold

<sup>6</sup> Reprinted by permission of the publishers and the Loeb Classical Library, from Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, Chap. 32, 1-6, trans. G. H. Rendall (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1953), pp. 413-15.

<sup>6</sup> *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani de Idolatria*, Chaps. 3-7, ed. and trans., Proefschrift door Pieter Gijssbertus van der Nat (Leiden: Saint Lucas Society, 1960), pp. 16-19. Reprinted by permission of the author.