

# 'Not to depart from Christ': Augustine between 'Manichaean' and 'Catholic' Christianity

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## Note:

Contribution to 'Augustine and Manichaean Christianity', the First South African Symposium on Augustine of Hippo, University of Pretoria, 24–26 April 2012. Dr Jason D. BeDuhn is participating as research fellow of Prof. Dr Hans van Oort, Professor Extraordinarius, Department of Church History and Polity of the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

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## Dates:

Received: 01 Nov. 2012  
Accepted: 10 Jan. 2013  
Published: 10 Apr. 2013

## How to cite this article:

BeDuhn, J.D., 2013, "Not to depart from Christ": Augustine between "Manichaean" and "Catholic" Christianity', *HTS Theologisches Studien/Theological Studies* 69(1), Art. #1355, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.1355>

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The North African Manichaean community provided the setting in which Augustine reaffirmed a commitment to Christ and to 'Christianity' that he had largely abandoned in the years of his secular education, and it cultivated in him a positive relationship to 'religion' in addition to his personal fondness for 'philosophy'. In both ways, his time with the Manichaeans formed an essential background to his later commitment to the 'Catholic' Christian community, and he continued to wrestle with that debt through his endeavours to convince Manichaeans that the Catholic Church could successfully address their earnest 'Christian' spiritual aspirations in a way Manichaean doctrine and practice never could.

## Introduction

In what follows, I wish to address two ways in which Augustine found himself 'between' Manichaean and Catholic Christianity, and in that way come to some comparative observations about these two religions. Firstly, Augustine passed between Manichaean and Catholic Christianity in his apostasy from the first and conversion to the second. Secondly, Augustine continued to occupy a fairly unique position between Manichaean and Catholic Christianity in his first decade and a half as a 'Catholic'. Both situations provided a certain kind of dialectic within which Augustine defined himself, in which Manichaeism served as far more than merely a negative pole. But to grasp the manner in which Manichaeism first shaped Augustine's religious sensibilities, and then continued to elicit responses from him that kept him out of the Catholic mainstream, we need to leave behind hagiographical attitudes towards Augustine, whether they be theologically motivated, or the product of secular appreciations of his intellectual or rhetorical brilliance. With rare exceptions, Augustine was not writing for the ages, but for immediate effect on the people around him in North Africa. His concern with Manichaeans after he had left their company arose first from his ongoing personal involvement with individuals who remained a part of that community, and only secondarily did it entail grappling with Manichaeism as a system of belief and practice, either as an extension of that personal involvement, or in the course of doing his polemical duty within the Catholic Church.

It is important that we do not treat the Manichaean and Catholic communities with which Augustine involved himself as two abstract -isms. Nor should we assume that Augustine had familiarity with the full set of attributes we assign to each of these religions from our study of all witnesses to them (Lim 1989:231–250). Augustine made his allegiances in a specific, regional environment, and in relation to specific individuals or small, immediate circles of people, both as a 'Manichaean' and as a 'Catholic'. We need to conceive of his time as a Manichaean in association with close friends such as Alypius, Honoratus, Nebridius, Romanianus, the unnamed friend who died in Thagaste, as well as in contact with the various anonymous Electi to which he refers including, at a critical juncture, the imposing figure of Faustus. Similarly, he found his way to Nicene Christianity in the specific and in some ways peculiar conditions of Milan, in relation to individuals such as Ambrose, Simplician, and the several socially well-connected individuals mentioned in his early literary compositions and correspondence (Brown 2000:69–107). His commitment had to survive his departure from this unique environment in Milan and return to Africa, where he found it impossible to escape the associations of his Manichaean past.

As a Manichaean, Augustine had already professed a commitment to the one supreme God, to Christ the divine revealer and saviour, to Paul the true Apostle, to the (qualified) authority of New Testament writings, to an ascetic ethic, and to a conception of the self as an exiled soul longing for a return to God. The presence of any of these elements in the writings he composed immediately after converting to Nicene Christianity proves nothing in itself about the rapidity and depth of his indoctrination into his new faith. Instead, we witness a gradual adaptation of these prior *symboli* imparted to him by a Manichaean Christianity to their meaning within a new ideological system, the Nicene-Catholic one. So when he said in *The Academics* that his new commitment to Platonism would not alter his resolve 'not to depart from Christ' as an

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authority (Augustinus, *Contra Academicos* 3.20.43), Augustine signalled a self-understanding by which he had already been committed to Christ as a *Manichaean* – just as was the case with such Manichaean spokesmen as Faustus (Augustinus, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 20.2), Fortunatus (Augustinus, *Contra Fortunatum* 3), or Felix (Augustinus, *Contra Felicem* 1.20), all of whom claimed for themselves the identity of *christianus*.

From all of the evidence available to us, Augustine first ‘came to Christ’, if we may use that expression, *through Manichaeism*. He had left the faith of his mother so far behind that his teacher in Madauros assumed him to be a fellow pagan (Augustinus, *Epistula* 16). This perception simply reflects the fact that his interests were more intellectual than religious, and that he immersed himself in the nominally pagan classics of the Roman literary and intellectual tradition. He chose a secular professional career centred on this tradition, as a rhetor and teacher, and remained a layperson both as a Manichaean and as a Catholic, until forced against his will into the priesthood. Of course, by the time that happened, he had already ventured into areas that might be characterised as the purview of a lay theologian. I wish to outline the steps by which this more explicitly religious identity arose, and the debt it owed to his experiences as a Manichaean.

## Part 1: Augustine passing between Manichaean and Catholic Christianity

Fired by a desire to adopt a ‘life in philosophy’, the young Augustine could find no actual philosophical community to join in Carthage. The intellectual environment reflected in Cicero was across the sea and four hundred years in the past. Apparently, the only group on the Carthaginian scene that seemed to Augustine to even remotely approximate such a philosophical focus was the Manichaean cell operating there. We can understand this choice if we remember what was meant by a ‘life in philosophy’ (Hadot 1995). Augustine understood philosophy to be a lifestyle, a self-disciplined existence that would subjugate the body and its passions and prepare the mind for perception of higher realities. The Manichaeans had practices of self-cultivation that seemed to carry through what he expected of such a life in philosophy from his reading. But by joining them, he necessarily accepted, alongside of what he regarded as philosophical elements, the sort of discourse and practices that we think of as ‘religious’.

Exactly where Augustine would have drawn a distinction between philosophy and religion at that time remains uncertain. Before we dismiss the question as anachronistic, we need to consider that Cicero himself recognised such a distinction, and could conceive of philosophers belonging to very different intellectual outlooks, yet sharing a commitment to conventional religious discourse and practice. Besides such classical sources, however, Augustine also had familiarity with some aspects of late antique philosophy, which complicated and in some respects blurred the distinction.

He seems to have read quite a bit of Pythagorean literature (Andresen 1968:77–98; Takeshi 1965:229–239; Solignac 1958:113–148), reflecting a model of the life in philosophy in which confession, prayers, hymn-singing, and fasting might all find a place as methods of self-cultivation.

Nor was there anything strange in the members of a ‘philosophical’ group reading and analysing religious myths, as Augustine would have almost immediately discovered the Manichaeans doing. He would have brought to this experience the intellectual expectation of his culture that a ‘myth’, by definition, cloaked rational doctrines under symbolic language (Brisson 2004). He patiently awaited further initiation into these philosophical truths concealed beneath the Manichaean myth, but they never came. They did not come, not because such an allegorical decoding was reserved for the Elect, to whose ranks he did not succeed in advancing (*pace* Decret 1978:244ff.). Rather, they did not come because there was no such philosophical decoding of myth in the Manichaean tradition. Whatever we think Mani might have intended by his storytelling, the Manichaean tradition after him had dogmatised his discourse in a strictly literal sense, seeing him as the ‘Great Hermeneut’ who decoded prior religious discourse, but whose own words were meant in a perfectly plain and literal sense without need of further interpretation. Based on Augustine’s later fondness for allegorical interpretations of sacred texts, in line with the broader hermeneutical assumptions of his culture, the Manichaean attitude quite probably suggested to him that they were not as ‘philosophical’ as he had initially thought.

We lack the sources to tell us how Augustine’s impression of Manichaeism evolved over the decade of his close association with its adherents. Just how quickly and how well did he become familiar with its full ‘religious’ content? This question has been a subject of recent debate.<sup>1</sup> We have no substantiated reason to think Augustine was deprived of the basic texts of Manichaeism just because he was a layperson (*pace* Coyle 2001). Nor was Augustine a typical layperson. He was a highly literate person and avid reader; and he refers specifically to reading Manichaean works as a Manichaean, as Johannes van Oort has demonstrated definitively (Van Oort 2008a:441–466, 2008b:113–121). So access to information was not a problem.

Yet we must remember that Augustine brought a classical education to his reading, and was bound to understand – or misunderstand, as the case may be – certain aspects of Manichaean doctrine against that background, especially in cases where he might easily conflate a Manichaean concept with a classical one to which it bore a superficial

1. On the question of Augustine’s knowledge/engagement with Manichaeism, Joseph Ratzinger, in his review of Adam (1967:217–222), takes the position that Augustine was not a very engaged Manichaean, while J. Kevin Coyle (2001:43–56) has gone so far as to suggest that Augustine actually read very little Manichaean literature. The opposite view has been taken above all by Johannes van Oort (1995:289–307), who goes so far as to credit Augustine with a comprehensive understanding of Manichaeism. Coyle (2001:45) rightly notes that van Oort’s appraisal of Augustine’s knowledge of Manichaeism was based on the latter’s work as a whole, and did not distinguish between what he had learned as a Manichaean, and what he learned later in his polemical engagement. Subsequently, van Oort (2008b:441–466) has attempted to meet this objection in ‘The Young Augustine’s Knowledge of Manichaeism: An Analysis of the *Confessiones* and Some Other Relevant Texts.’

resemblance. At the same time, he had his own peculiar interests, which means, for example, that while he was aware of Manichaean *criticism* of the Bible, he apparently paid less attention to how Manichaeans used the Bible in more positive expositions of their faith. I think this sort of partial and selective attention and understanding best explains why Augustine, as a Catholic, could be taken by surprise by aspects of Manichaeism he had not fully appreciated when he had adhered to the system, and why we can see him learning more about Manichaeism as he continued to study its texts for polemical purposes.<sup>2</sup> In this qualified way, then, we might embrace the late J. Kevin Coyle's assertion that 'Augustine as a Catholic presbyter and bishop came to learn aspects of Manichaeism which had been beyond the reach of Augustine the Manichaean Hearer' (Coyle 2001:56). That is, he was re-exposed to certain Manichaean tenets that he had neglected in his own time as a Manichaean; he heard things differently in the words of Fortunatus, Felix, Secundinus, even Faustus, than he had heard them before, and perhaps in this way was driven to take up again Manichaean texts he had already read as a Hearer, with fresh perspective on what he was reading. The question of Augustine's access to information as a Manichaean, therefore, must be distinguished from the issue of his accurate intellectual grasp of that information. The most telling indication that he at times went far astray in his understanding is his report of his own attitude of self-exoneration from sin, and lack of enthusiasm for confession (Augustinus, *Confessionum libri XIII* 5.10.18), when we know how central this practice was for Manichaeism, and how one Manichaean text after another stresses responsibility, compunction and craving for forgiveness. Due to misconstruals such as this, we should no more exaggerate his expertise than we should his ignorance. Yet even on this point, it is possible that Augustine came to grasp the full import of Manichaean confessional practices *as a Catholic*, and incorporated that new understanding into an appeal to them woven into his *Confessions* – a subject to which we will return.

The tension between Augustine's interest in a life in philosophy, and the non-philosophical character of certain Manichaean teachings and practices, came to a head in his time with the Manichaean bishop Faustus. Faustus in some way shocked and disappointed Augustine's assumptions about what he was doing as a Manichaean. That much is clear. But recovering the character of that shock, and its possible consequences for Augustine, is complicated. I have made an attempt to sort out the evidence in two previous publications, where I have drawn parallels between the stances taken by Faustus and the principles of Academic Scepticism, and suggested how his philosophically-motivated disinterest in defending core Manichaean doctrines delivered the shock to

<sup>2</sup>To a certain extent, then, I take a position close to that of Ratzinger (1967:222): 'Im übrigen sollte man doch auch bedenken, daß Augustin als Manichäer Laie, nicht Theologe war, und daß die geistige Arbeit seiner manichäischen Zeit den Problemen der rhetorischen Kultur der Spätantike galt, wie die Titel seiner verlorenen Veröffentlichungen aus dieser Periode zeigen. Allem nach hat er sich in der Zeit vor der religiösen Krise, die zur Bekehrung führte, mit religiöser Literatur nicht wesentlich mehr befaßt, als ein gebildeter Akademiker es auch heute tut, und so dürfte seine literarische Kenntnis des Manichäismus verhältnismäßig gering geblieben sein; erst in der Zeit der Auseinandersetzung hat er sich etwas mehr damit beschäftigt. Insofern ist der vorchristliche Augustin eher durch die Namen Cicero und Vergil als durch den Namen Mani zu erfassen.'

Augustine's expectations that ultimately led him out of the Manichaean community (BeDuhn 2010:106–134, 2009b:1–28). Others are not convinced that Faustus's manner of handling questions about Manichaean dogma had its inspiration and motivation in an informed philosophical scepticism (Van Ort 2011:558–561). Nevertheless, there is sufficient consistency between the stance he takes in his public discourses, the *Capitula*, and what Augustine reports of his private attitudes amongst fellow Manichaeans in *Confessions* to understand Faustus as adamantly committed to a program of winning assent by reason alone, without resort to authority. This was the Manichaean program to which Augustine had been won over:

I fell among these people for no other reason than that they declared that they would put aside all overawing authority, and by pure and simple reason would bring to God those who were willing to listen to them, and so deliver them from all error. (Augustinus, *De utilitate credendi* 1.2)

For Faustus, this delivery from error and bringing to God required only demonstration of the dualistic premise of the Manichaean world view, accompanied by those teachings directly related to practice and to the formation of moral selves. Thus, he neither pursued the program of reason alone in defence of every detail of the Manichaean system, nor resorted to authority to substantiate parts of the system not amenable to rational proofs, but displayed a pragmatic focus which coincides with the distinctive character of Academic Scepticism amongst the philosophical schools represented in the literature of the time. He expressly ridiculed dogmatic obsession with trivial questions, and refrained himself from insisting upon the certainty of Manichaean teaching in several areas (e.g. the nature of Christ's incarnation [Augustinus, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 5.2–3]; the interpolation of particular passages into the Bible [Augustinus, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 11.1, 18.3, 19.1, 33.1–3]; even the visionary basis of Mani's teachings [Augustinus, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 32.20]). Evidently, he included Manichaean astronomical and astrological teachings in this category of inessentials, and declined to engage Augustine on the subject. For Augustine's own passion for astrology and astronomy at the time, of course, these were the most interesting and 'most difficult' questions (O'Laughlin 1992:101–125):

When I raised these points for consideration and discussion he refused courteously enough ... for he knew that he did not know about these matters, and was not ashamed to admit it. ... This attitude endeared him to me all the more, for the restraint of a mind that admits its limitations is more beautiful than the beautiful things about which I desired to learn. I found him consistent in this approach to all the more difficult and subtle questions. (Augustinus, *Confessionum libri XIII* 5.7.12)

Augustine, for his own strategic narrative reasons, was content to identify Faustus's motives with a Socratean *modestus* and *cautus* about what he did not know, without spoon-feeding his readers the obvious association of Socrates with the Academy, which identified him as the ideal sceptic.

In no way do I wish to suggest that Faustus was a *philosopher*, that he had particular expertise in the Fourth Academy beyond the derivative references to it in the writings of

someone like Cicero, or that he was an adherent of scepticism masquerading as a Manichaean. Instead, just as we may say that Ambrose and Augustine were Catholics with Platonist tendencies, or even 'Platonist Catholics', so we may say that Faustus was a Manichaean with tendencies toward Academic Scepticism, or one who used the Academic Sceptical tradition as a resource in service of his adherence to Manichaeism. Moreover, just as in the case of the two renowned Catholic leaders, so with Faustus, we cannot speak of a pure, unmixed, or strict application of philosophical principles from a single school, but only of a dominant philosophical conversation partner within a very loose field of popular philosophical discourse typical of late antiquity.

Augustine's own serious dalliance with Academic Scepticism seems to have occurred only at the end of his time as a Manichaean, that is, in the immediate aftermath of the time he spent in religious and secular study with Faustus. Traditionally, it has been taken as an intellectual reaction to the disappointment of Faustus; but this characterisation arises from the mistake of considering Augustine's scepticism as an alternative to, and departure from, Manichaeism. In other words, the attribution to Augustine of a distinct 'sceptical period' after his 'Manichaean period', and that is constituted a reaction to, rather than influence of, Faustus, depends on an erroneous understanding of Augustine's status *vis-à-vis* Manichaeism in the years immediately following his time with Faustus (as well as a misapprehension of his reasons for leaving Africa). It has since come to be recognised that Augustine identifies himself as an adherent of Academic Scepticism at the same time he continued to be a Manichaean, in Rome and initially in Milan. He had left Africa not in order to abandon Manichaeism, but precisely in order to be able to maintain his commitment to it at a time of persecution (BeDuhn 2009a:85–124). Augustine continued to observe Manichaean practices, and persisted in viewing Manichaean doctrines as plausible, that is, not demonstrably false (Augustinus, *Confessionum libri XIII* 5.14.25).

Nevertheless, Augustine's absence from Africa and increasingly critical comparison of Manichaean teaching to other intellectual alternatives eventually set the stage for his passage from the Manichaean community to the Catholic one. Despite various frustrations and disappointments with Manichaeism, however, he had learned to value a certain kind of religious life, and was determined 'not to depart from Christ' as a figure of authority nurtured in him, if not introduced, by Manichaeism. Not that he aspired to be anything but a layperson and philosopher. He happily continued in his secular career, wrote philosophical treatises on metaphysics, epistemology, and psychology, and planned a program of self-cultivation not through religious disciplines, but through an ascending education in the liberal arts. All the same, more than a decade as a Manichaean apparently had instilled certain religious reflexes and habits in him, such that, when he left the Manichaeans, he adopted not just an alternative philosophy – Platonism – but also, as complement to it, an alternative religious system – Catholic or Nicene. He could now pick up the biblical Psalms and

wisdom books, as well as the epistles of Paul, with a certain degree of appreciation, and through attendance at the sermons of Ambrose found at last a proper understanding of the need to decode myth – such as the biblical narrative – into philosophical truths. In other words, he was able to take up the life of a religious man because he had warmed to religion as a Manichaean, and found in the Catholic Church of Milan a similarly elevated level of intellectual engagement.

But who was this 'Christ' to whom he maintained his allegiance? He tells us himself, in the works written around the time of his conversion, and also in hindsight in *Confessions*, where he retrospectively criticises the inadequacy of his understanding of Christ at that time. We note, first, that Christ stands in good company, surrounded by other sages who excelled in immediate perception of truth: Pythagoras, Plato, and Plotinus. Western Manichaeans likewise regarded Pythagoras and Plato, along with Hermes Trismegistus, as authentic sages of truth. In one sense, Augustine regarded Jesus as simply the most accomplished of these figures, the one who had most perfectly and directly served as a conduit of truth to humanity. Yet there was also the Christ who stood for this truth itself, as the 'Power and Wisdom of God'. The characterisation, derived from 1 Corinthians 1:24, was a favourite amongst the Manichaeans, referring to Christ in his transcendental aspect as *nous* and *dynamis*; and it likewise was Augustine's favourite way of referring to Christ throughout his early post-conversion writings. Above all, Augustine understood Christ in the Manichaean sense as a revealer, as a being who even in his death and resurrection simply communicated certain insights and lessons for others to learn. Totally missing from the early Catholic Augustine was any sense of Christ's death as a redemptive work.

Augustine could not simply carry on his philosophical pursuits in peace, however. A further step of his transformation came with his obligations as a convert to Nicene Christianity to employ his rhetorical skills in the production of 'apostate literature' targeting the Manichaeans. This work had the dual effect of furthering his own Catholic indoctrination through repetition of key Nicene *symboli*, while at the same time constantly engaging his past, negated self as reflected in his still unconverted Manichaean friends. Augustine produced several such works alongside of his more philosophical compositions, including *De moribus*, *De vera religione*, *Genesis contra manichaeos*. We cannot really be sure if he would have produced many more of such works alongside his more serious philosophical pursuits, just as we cannot assume that his forays into scriptural interpretation in them necessarily represented the leading edge of an envisioned exegetical effort on the massive scale of his later career. Augustine might have had his life all planned out at this point, but we cannot assume that the plan corresponded with what subsequently occurred.

The final stage in Augustine's shift in circumstances then came with his forced ordination, and change of profession. His life in philosophy was now largely at an end, and he had obligations to recite and expound upon biblical language on

a regular basis. At the time of his ordination, he protested his completely inadequate preparation for such a task (Augustinus, *Epistula* 21). He was forced to learn on the job, and gradually familiarised himself with the Bible, while avidly pursuing any exegetical work he could find to guide him in applying the allegorical method to translate biblical content into maxims and lessons for living, as well as deeper philosophical propositions about the ultimate meaning of life. This second wave of 'Catholicisation', following his initial conversion, did not, however, spell the end of his engagement with Manichaeism.

## Part 2: Augustine standing between Manichaean and Catholic Christianity

Augustine had two reasons for remaining, despite the risks, 'between' Manichaean and Catholic Christianity in his literary persona as a leader of the Catholic community. In the first place, he had friends amongst the Manichaeans, for whose conversion he laboured to a remarkable extent. His efforts in this regard were neither perfunctory gestures nor performances for his Catholic peers. He went out of his way to invoke the bonds of friendship and past shared experience, as well as to sympathise with certain appealing features of Manichaean teaching. None of this would have endeared him to the more conservative leaders of the African Catholic Church, just as they would have been displeased by Augustine's hints in various places that he continued to converse with these 'heretics' in private, and not just in public debate. The latter more public engagement belongs to the second reason Augustine took his stand between Manichaean and Catholic Christians: as an informed apostate, he possessed a unique vantage from which to challenge and resist Manichaeans on the contested ground of 'Christianity', over which his past and present communities competed. Manichaeism occupies a part of Augustine's rhetorical *oeuvre* comparable to that devoted to the Donatists and Pelagians, and well eclipsing that devoted to paganism or Judaism, because it represents a rival option of *Christian* faith – a distinct and parallel trajectory of Christian development which itself was critical of the 'semi-Christianity' of the Catholics.

To understand how Manichaeism positioned itself as an alternative, and indeed 'true', Christianity, we should think in terms of initially distinct 'eastern' and 'western' trajectories of the Christian movement. These two rival forms of Christianity were separated at birth, acculturated in different environments, each in their own way shaped by and adapted to local conditions. In the west, the Christian movement entered into a Hellenistic milieu that played a large role in defining its modes of expression, the context of assumptions within which it would possess meaning, its terminology and practices. In the east, the Christian movement developed on the basis of different cultural traditions and assumptions, producing something quite distinct, which we call Manichaeism. Each developed selected features of the shared root tradition, and then collided in their differences.

For this reason, Augustine could not just treat Manichaeism as a rejected 'other', a non-Christian heathenism. He had to deal with Manichaeans referencing Christian authorities (Jesus, Paul), and Christian themes (evil, world as prison, enslavement to sin, soul's desire for 'return' to 'another world'). The Nicene tradition he adopted had partially defined itself over against 'heresies', including Manichaeism, and had made certain contrasting choices – emphasising God as creator and providential orderer of the world, free will, et cetera. It had downplayed or set aside features of the earlier Christian movement that had become too closely associated with its rivals, just as those rivals likewise represented developments of selected Christian themes.

Augustine originally adopted this developed Nicene set of positions in all their contrast to the Manichaeism he had abandoned. Then, for motives that he does not expressly identify, he gradually appropriated from Manichaeism elements of the Christian tradition that the latter emphasised, but had been neglected in the Nicene-Catholic tradition. While his motives remain uncertain, the context of his shift is clear: his ongoing struggle with the Manichaeans of North Africa, and his effort to convert them. This continuing encounter with Manichaeans brought to Augustine's attention certain elements of the Christian tradition that Catholics had previously downplayed: in particular, Paul's witness to the debility of the will, the mind's struggle against the 'flesh'.

The rise of these elements in Augustine's thinking has been attributed to his personal psychology, a darkening of his view of himself and of humanity in general. Alternatively, they have been ascribed to a kind of inexorable logic gradually working itself out in his thought in isolation from anything going on around him. But such psychological or philosophical accounts are largely speculative, and will not take us very far towards historical conclusions. As a historian, I can fairly be accused of fixating on the surface of things, namely a historical context in which individuals such as Augustine do what they do. And when we look for such a context to Augustine's shift of positions in the 390s CE, we find nothing in the Catholic community (or the Donatist community that represented the other rival Christian community) that could have prompted the direction he took. Nor, I think, can we justify giving the credit to the words of Paul himself. Augustine had read Paul a number of times, and had always found in him precisely what he wanted to. The only ones reading Paul the way Augustine came to in the 390s were the Manichaeans. Undoubtedly, Augustine had been exposed as a Manichaean auditor to some version of this reading of Paul, and the related issues of the subjected human will and its dependence on grace for liberation. But what he reports of his personal understanding as a Manichaean suggests that his grasp of these points was somewhat confused. Consequently, we find ourselves in the enviable position of being able to actually overhear the exchange in which Augustine received fresh instruction in just how Manichaeans read Paul on the subject of human will and divine grace.

At the end of August 392 CE, Fortunatus bludgeoned Augustine over the head with Paul, quoting a key set of verses from Romans 7, Galatians 5, and Ephesians 2 (see Alflatt 1974:113–134, 1975:171–186; Rutzenhöfer 1992:5–72; Fredriksen 2010:142–154). Augustine's vain attempt to force a free-will reading on the latter passage tells us all we need to know about where Augustine stood at the time as a loyal son of the Catholic Church, defending its free will position. Yet the way Fortunatus read Paul that day is largely how Augustine read Paul five years later, albeit set within a radically different metaphysical and theological framework.

In fact, Augustine yielded some ground to Fortunatus's reading of Paul in the immediate aftermath of their debate, but only to find a stronger position from which to resist Manichaeism. Drawing on sources within his own Nicene-Catholic tradition, as well as on a few suggestions of the Donatist writer Tyconius, he formulated a rather stable, well-reasoned conception that explained Paul's expression of disability as due to the power of self-created habit, while at the same time anchoring a qualified free-will position around the idea of being saved by faith – that is, freely willing to throw oneself on the mercy of God to free one's good will from powerlessness amid mortality and ingrained habit. He built into this construct an anti-Manichaean defence of the value of the Old Testament law as the instrument through which God exposes human incapacity to act rightly, and thus drives those who will to reliance on faith (see Fredriksen 2010:155–189).

This set of ideas, developed *circa* 392–396 CE, was a perfectly good answer to Fortunatus and the Manichaeans, sufficiently consistent with the established orthodox discourse on these subjects, and there was absolutely no reason for Augustine to abandon it. But abandon it he did almost immediately. We see him rapidly undercut the role of the Old Testament as he develops the idea of the congruent call, operating both externally in signs and internally in mental admonition, so closely resembling the operations of the Manichaean Light *Nous*. We see him disassemble his careful construct of salvation by faith, by giving this call an absolute power to elect to salvation regardless of the presence or absence of any predisposition to good will. We see him constructing, largely with reference to the same Pauline passages cited by Fortunatus, a very similar concept of salvation by grace, by some sort of predetermining election quite similar to what Fortunatus and Faustus argued Paul meant in speaking of the birth of the New Man, out of a mixed mass of good and bad elements in the Old Man that is not really a conscious and responsible human being at all. If today Christian theologians find in Paul the apostle of grace, it is due to the powerful influence of Augustine, the doctor of grace. And even though there are distinctive qualities to Augustine's doctrine of grace that have nothing to do with Manichaeism, the degree to which he found in Paul a source of such an idea derives from his unique position between Manichaean and Christian theology. So we can confirm the words of J. Kevin Coyle, 'without Manichaeism, there would still have been

Augustine, perhaps even Augustine the great theologian; but it would have been a different Augustine, with a different theology' (Coyle 2003:22).

At the risk of appearing to be something of a Hegelian, I suggest that Augustine in certain respects fashioned a historical synthesis out of the two conflicting traditions that had successively claimed his allegiance. Few shy away from saying as much about his blending of Platonism with Nicene Christianity, perhaps because they buy into Augustine's claim that Plato was himself a kind of anticipatory Christian. But to say as much of his use of Manichaean concepts stirs controversy because of the 'heretical' or even 'non-Christian' character of that tradition. I find little use for such predetermining boundary drawing. Everyone who came after Jesus within the Christian tradition could be fairly characterised as a 'heretic' of one kind or another, because they introduced interpretations that cannot be shown to be inherent in the teachings of Jesus himself – Ambrose, Athanasius, Origen, Paul himself, are all Christian 'heretics' in this regard. The question of what may or may not be 'Christian' comes to more or less the same thing. If we are to avoid theologically normative assessments of what counts as Christian, we must accept a community's self-definition on whether or not they belong to a particular religious tradition.

We can definitively leave behind the portrayal of Mani in the *Acta Archelai* (Hegemonius, *Acta Archelai* 65.2–6), as someone who added to his teachings a veneer of Christian content as a last-minute marketing ploy. A Christian impetus can be found in Mani's religion from its inception. But it is a Christian impetus received by Mani in a distinctive, Asiatic context – and that made all the difference. Just as Augustine found concordance between Christ and Plato, so Mani found key alignments between Christ and Zoroaster and the Buddha, amongst other spiritual forebears. Neither Augustine nor Mani considered themselves any less followers of Christ for doing so. Just as Augustine did not depart from Christ in leaving Manichaeism and becoming a Platonist and Catholic, so Mani did not depart from Christ in discerning a universal religious message equally revealed by prophets across the globe long before Jesus walked – or appeared to walk – upon the earth.

I would submit that Augustine, at least through the time when he composed *Confessions*, remained convinced of the earnestness of Manichaean aspirations to a spiritual, Christian life, however much he had concluded that Manichaeism itself did not possess the resources to properly nurture such aspirations. As mentioned before, one of the things Augustine appears to have gotten wrong in his own practice of Manichaean Christianity was his failure to internalise its confessional ethos. As a Catholic Christian, he often asserted that Manichaean belief in the inherent divinity of the soul necessarily precluded any sense of personal sinfulness. He reports this same deficiency in his own case in the narrative of *Confessions*. And yet, he seems to have come to realise that Manichaeans at least aspired to a confessional

attitude, however much their ideology counter-acted it. This realisation provides the context for Book 9 of *Confessions* where, as Annemaré Kotzé has convincingly demonstrated, he prescribes the biblical Psalms as the antidote to Manichaean self-exaltation (Kotzé 2001:119–136). If only they could see the effect the Psalms had on him, who once shared – as he saw it – their failure to truly confess. His rhetorical argument only works if he assumed they genuinely aspired to such a confessional orientation to God, if he could offer his ‘Catholic’ method as a fulfilment of their ‘Manichaean’ goals.

But even if he prescribed the words of the Old Testament as the humbling antidote that would make Manichaeans into Catholics, Augustine goes on in *Confessions* to radically qualify even the Bible’s authority in relation to what he seems to imagine Manichaeans and Catholics share in their common quest in search of truth. The Bible is, for Augustine, only a temporary instrument of this search, necessitated by the fall into matter and the obscurity of language. If acceptance of the Old Testament constitutes one of the chief distinctions separating Manichaeans from what Faustus describes as the ‘semi-Christianity’ of the Catholics, Augustine works to grind down this hurdle in order for the Manichaeans to clear it. So, in Books 11–13 of *Confessions* (in Augustinus, *Confessionum libri XII*), he first demonstrates how allegorical interpretation takes away the features of the biblical text that offended the Manichaeans. That is, he does not defend the literal meaning of the text to which they objected, or insist they must withdraw those objections. Rather, implicitly treating their objections as valid, he points them to another level of meaning – a level that is *necessary* in acknowledgment of the validity of the problems with the literal level of meaning. Then, towards the end of Book 13, Augustine pointedly identifies the Bible with the ‘firmament’ God created in the Genesis story, which at one and the same time stabilises human reality in this world while separating human beings from direct communion with God. That is why, Augustine stresses, God will ‘roll up’ both the firmament of the sky and the firmament of the Bible, when he welcomes amongst his elect those he has secretly selected, ‘before the firmament was made’, both inside and outside the Catholic Church. These saved souls – chosen, called, enabled by God in a strikingly Manichaean conception of grace – belong to an ultimate reality that transcends the authority of the Bible and of the Church. Therefore, Augustine appears to imply, to temporarily accept the authority of the Catholic Church and its full scripture amounts to a trifle, a mere ‘change of a few words and sentiments’, that his Manichaean friends just might be willing to do for both their immediate and ultimate good.<sup>3</sup>

Augustine signals through the composition of *Confessions* that he saw himself as uniquely and providentially positioned ‘between’ Manichaean and Catholic Christianity for just this purpose. He would carry on in his efforts for only a few more years, however. His hoped-for resolution of the division between Manichaean and Catholics – perhaps *too* creative,

<sup>3</sup>For a full development of this interpretation of *Confessions* Book 13, see BeDuhn (2013).

abstract, and mystical – failed to materialise in practical terms, and many of those he hoped to convert remained resolutely within the Manichaean camp. The tone of his anti-Manichaean writings became increasingly harsh, his new arguments more defensive than inviting. Ultimately, he sanctioned coercive measures to bring them into the Catholic Church, with only the consolation that, as fellow Christians, forced conversion would not require them to ‘depart from Christ’.

## Conclusion

In his North African setting in the 4th and 5th centuries CE, Augustine very easily could have passed through his entire spiritual journey from childhood to death thinking of himself as a ‘Christian’, despite peregrinations through a largely secular or even pagan schooling and more than a decade as a Manichaean. It is preferable to assess the issue of religious boundaries at such local or even individual levels, rather than to impose artificial definitions of traditions as a whole. The debate over whether Manichaeism was a form of Christianity (or a Christian ‘heresy’) or its own independent religion has continued to burden study of this tradition. There are arguments on both sides, shaped respectively by different criteria proposed for settling the question. The most important fruit of this labour, it seems to me, is to once and for all break the habit of talking of Mani and Manichaeans as ‘heretics’, and to cease using a comparison to ‘orthodoxy’ either to reject their Christian identity or to lay authoritative claim over the merits of their distinctive religious vision. As a ‘Manichaean’, Augustine learned a wholly plausible argument for Manichaean claims on the legacy of Christ; and as a ‘Catholic’ he adopted an alternative claim on the same legacy, justified by a different but equally plausible argument. The Manichaean community was part of a diverse Christian movement that, in Augustine’s lifetime, was being distilled through normativising processes consolidating Catholic dominance. It fell to individual leaders such as Augustine to determine what would be included within the ‘Catholic’ product of those processes, whether derived from within (e.g. Christological positions, traditions of biblical exegesis) or without (e.g. Platonic metaphysics) the larger Christian movement. Thus, Augustine was in a position to make normative judgments that identified some aspects of Manichaeism as suitably ‘Christian’ and justified appropriating and adapting them for the ‘Catholic’ synthesis, while rejecting others as foreign bodies within Christianity as he and his colleagues were defining it. It is important that we give due attention to this simultaneous boundary-forming and boundary-crossing activity as an intrinsic part of the development of Christianity, and do our part to illuminate the ephemeral situatedness of every historical attempt to define or control what it means to be ‘Christian’.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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