

Lily Selthofner

Prof. Karen Van Dyck

HUMACC1002

02/12/21

A Close Textual Analysis: How Manichaeism Influenced Augustine's Philosophy

In "Confessions," nineteen-year-old Augustine begins a ten-year journey as a Hearer of the Manichaean religious sect. This paper will explore Augustine's journey through Manichaeism. A modern "dead religion," Augustine states in *Confessions* -- we will analyze the factors that appealed and eventually deterred him from this religion, such as reading Cicero's *Hortensius* and his subsequent philosophical journey, his connection to Christianity besides a few tensions with principles, and his non-committal relationship to purity and releasing sin (BeDuhn 1).

To understand the appeal of Manichaeism, one must first understand the structure, function, and beliefs of the Manichean sect. Manichaeism is a Gnostic religion founded by Mani, or Manihayya, a Persian who lived from 216-276 CE (BeDuhn ix, Oort 3). Gnostic means that it relates to knowledge, especially esoteric mystical knowledge: Manichaeism's marker is its unique combination of faith and wisdom termed evangelical gnosticism (Ellman). In his goal of yielding a universal religion, he integrated many religious beliefs and systematically converted people by catering to their geopolitical religious contexts (Mendelson 75). Mani codified all of his teachings including the seven writings that compose the Manichaean canon such as *The Living Gospel* and *The Book of Mysteries* (Matusek 89). Furthermore, Manichaeism's only modern practitioners are rumored to be found in Southern China, where the last Manichaean temple stands (Bossions).

Mani codified his own texts, disproving the misconception that oral tradition is the reason many lost spiritual practices have faded from modern belief (Stewart). This infusion of other belief systems in Manichaeism, particularly astrological and Christian concepts, correlates to that of Paganism, which experienced a similar downfall throughout history. In fact, the term 'Paganism' was constructed by Christian authorities to denote those who did not accept the Christian God and adhered to secular and ecclesiastic traditions (Jones xxiii). Though Christianity began as a branch of Judaism, it became independent relatively quickly, perhaps contributing to its success.

Manichaeism's marker and particular appeal to Augustine stems from its combination of faith and wisdom (Mendelson 75). In faith, Augustine was particularly attracted to Mani's self-identification as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Manichaean philosophy was unique in that it resolved Augustine's two greatest tensions with Catholicism: Genesis, and Augustine's neocorporal conception of God (Matusek 95). Differing from Catholicism, Mani believed Christ never manifested physically -- and therefore never truly died on the cross -- as he was a spiritual lightbeing perceived to be physical (Mendelson 76). This perfectly coincides with Augustine's non-physical conception of God at the time: "Instead, under the pretense of being

oh-so-precise, I got shifted into partisanship with those idiot confidence men [The Manichaeans] when they asked... whether God was limited by a physical form and had hair and fingernails..." (Augustine 63).

As opposed to the Genesisian belief in an omnipotent and totally good God, Mani's cosmogony believed that the two principles of good and evil existed before the creation of heaven and Earth (Matusek 78). Reading the Bible, Augustine deemed it "veiled in mysteries" and believed it "not even worth comparing to the excellence of Cicero's *Hortensius*" (Augustine 59). Furthermore, Augustine was asked "... what the source of evil was..." by the Manichaeans and decided, through his desire for truth instead of blindness, awareness instead of ignorance, that since evil exists, God cannot be all-good (Augustine 63, 56).

Manichaeism's ecclesiastical hierarchical structures are founded upon a similar basis to Christianity: the 'chosen ones,' Elects, were Manichaean monks who abstained from a wide variety of evil deeds. Those not ready or willing to commit to the role of an Elect were called Hearers (of which Augustine was), who served the Elects to contribute to both the Hearer's and Elect's purity in lightness. Manichaeans hold a dualistic worldview where all bad, or the "Prince of Darkness," manifests physically, and all good, or the "Kingdom of Light," manifests spiritually. Mani believed the soul was light, and the human experience was entangled in the darkness of physical form (Matusek 90). By acting and living purely, one could channel this divine light. One example is that Elects' eating habits in regards to goodness and evil, he says:

"... a fig weeps when it's plucked, and that its mother the tree sheds lacteous tears... that if some 'saint' gobbled the fig -- provided that plucking it was somebody else's crime, not the saint's! -- he could then exhale the angels he'd concocted in his guts -- no, wait: it would be little crumbs of a god coming out whenever he groaned or belched in prayer" (Augustine 71).

Augustine's annoyance with the concept of Elects (chosen saints) seems hypocritical at a first glance, due to Christian sanctification and good and evil paradigms, but Manichaean hierarchy is more action-oriented and philosophically uniform. Christianity still holds similar principles to Manichaeism: both use confessions as intermediary communication with God. However, as Augustine aged, he moved towards a more personal relationship with God, most notably remembered in his *Tolle Lege* moment: "... and then I heard a voice from the household next door.... incessantly and insistently chanting, 'Pick it up! Read it! Pick it up! Read it! (Augustine 236)'" In this moment of frustration with Manichaean values explained below, feeling philosophically and theologically stuck, he instantaneously converted to Christianity upon this moment of biblical inspiration.

More specifically, Augustine's philosophical relationship to evil included both intellectual and experiential aspects (Matusek iii). In his newfound obsession of "*philosophia*... [meaning] 'love of wisdom'" -- Augustine wondered "... what the source of evil was..." (Augustine 58, 63). Both of these qualms were initially soothed by Manichaeism, but were also the qualities that led him back to Christianity in the midst of his existential crisis. Mani's rational framework was a continual battle for Augustine: "And I'd also gone down crooked paths in that godless cult of Manichaeism, not from any assurance that its assertions were true, but merely preferring it to other beliefs -- and these I didn't reverently pursue, but instead attacked like an enemy on the battlefield" (Augustine 223-224).

He resolves to leave the “godless cult” of the Manichaeans because he outwits their philosophical uniformity of goodness and evil in action, wondering what it means if a church member is caught between two wrangling impulses: “whether to go to the theater or to our church...” (Augustine 223, 230). He realizes Manichaeans must either admit, against their will, that going to church is a good impulse, or that a person has two evil minds within themselves. How could one toggle between two negative impulses, or even two positive ones, when Manichaeans “... aren’t accustomed to saying that there’s such a great mob of divergent *substances* in human beings” (Augustine 231). The use of the word *substances* references the Manichaean elemental philosophy, conveying what is more commonly known as “divergent wills” (Augustine 230). These thoughts lead him away from Manichaeism in the moments before his Tolle Lege moment, yet there is still the experiential aspect of evil to be conquered before conversion can occur.

In the experiential realm, Augustine struggled with his own weaknesses and temptations in youth (Matusek 2). Perhaps he aligned with Manichaeism due to its attractive belief that evil is beyond one’s own control. For example, popular African beliefs at the time, such as the “evil eye” and “evil mouth” as manifestations of the physical form of suffering, were adopted by the Manichaeans (Matusek 94). Other compelling Manichaean influences include spurring the onset of contemporary medical-astrological beliefs -- meaning different parts of the Zodiac are ascribed to different parts of the body -- such as Aries ruling the head, Scorpio ruling the genitals, and Gemini ruling most parts of the body that come in pairs (like the lungs and hands) (Matusek 92). Furthermore, Mani also believed in the five elements (water, air, wind, fire, and light), with light being spirit/divine substance, and even ascribed various zodiacs to each element (Matusek 89). Many of these principles now influence modern society in revitalized ways through the resurrection of Pagan ideas (Lesiv 14).

Manichaeism contextualized understanding of evil as a physical form and determined cosmological influence to be the perpetrator of physical wrongdoing (such as lust or unhealthy eating). Mani deemed the Elects pure: celibate and strictly vegetarian, while Hearers were able to indulge in such things because sin is a cosmological act, not a personal one -- a philosophy particularly attractive to young Augustine, that he later resented (Matusek 94, Augustine 79).

Yet, at some point, Augustine’s search for wisdom overcame his physical desires. “... merely hunting for [wisdom] -- let alone finding it -- now was more important for me than... the kingdoms of this world, or a flood of physical pleasures at my beck and call” (Augustine 223). He alludes he is now ready to commit to a sin-free life. He outwits Manichaean philosophy, simultaneously tackling his deterrents from Christianity - no longer believing in dualistic Gods -- saying evil merely is the absence of good through human perversion (MacDonald 10). In his Tolle Lege moment, he is called to give up his physical sins, which he now takes responsibility for: “Don’t clothe yourself in raucous dinner parties and drunkenness, not in the immortality of sleeping around, not in feuds and competition; but clothe yourself in the Master, Jesus Christ, and do not make provision for the body in its inordinate desires” (Augustine 236).

Augustine's journey towards and away from Manichaeism was spurred by Cicero's *Hortensius* and subsequent inquiries about the neocorporal nature of God, and his ill-preparedness to give up sin in the name of Christianity. Through this journey, one can peer into potential reasons for the fall of Manichaeism, and the interesting rise of some of their beliefs in contemporary eclectic Paganism.

Augustine's biased account of his decades-long relationship with Manichaeism provides unique insights into Manichaeism, such as discourse on good and evil paradigms and religious hierarchy. Likewise, by understanding more about Manichaeism itself, scholars and religious thinkers can better understand Augustine's eventual Christian adherence.

Works Cited

- Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Sarah Ruden, The Modern Library, 2017.
- MacDonald, Scott. "Augustine." *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2017, pp. 1–16.
doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199662241.013.39.
- BeDuhn, Jason. *The Manichaean Body: in Discipline and Ritual*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.
- Bossons, Matthew. "China's Forgotten Faith: How Did a 3rd Century Religion from Iran Make It to China's Southeast Coast?" *RADII*, 16 Mar. 2020, radiichina.com/manichaeism-chinas-forgotten-faith/.
- Ellmann, Richard. "Gnostic." *The New Oxford Book of American Verse*, Oxford University Press, 1976.
- Jones, Christopher P. *Between Pagan and Christian*. Harvard University Press, 2014.
- Lesiv, Mariya. *The Return of Ancestral Gods: Modern Ukrainian Paganism as an Alternative Vision for a Nation*. Montreal : McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013.
- Matusek, Edward. "University of South Florida." 2011, University of South Florida Scholar Commons, 2011, pp. iii-121,
scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=4928&context=etd.
- Mendelson, Michael. *The History of Evil in Antiquity: 2000 BCE-450 CE*, by Tom Angier, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019, pp. 75–89.

Oort, J. van. *Mani and Augustine: Collected Essays on Mani, Manichaeism and Augustine.*

Brill, 2020.

Stewart, Don. "Did Jesus Write Anything?" *Blue Letter Bible*,

www.blueletterbible.org/faq/don_stewart/don_stewart_192.cfm.