



## AUGUSTINE

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**AUGUSTINE**, prominent Christian theologian and philosopher, born 354 in Thagaste, Numidia. In 373 he became a Manichean and for nine years belonged to their church as a layman, *auditor*. His profession as a rhetor and his intellectual curiosity made him ponder over Manichean doctrines from a philosophical point of view. The reading of Cicero's work *Hortensius* incited him to find real Wisdom. It was the pretension of the Manicheans to possess Wisdom that induced Augustine to be one of them. Pursuing his philosophical studies, in an eclectic way based upon the Academy, Aristotelian logic, the Stoa, and Neoplatonism, Augustine soon discovered that Manicheism was in no way built upon philosophical premises, but on the preaching of its founder, Mani. Augustine urged the leading Manichean theologians of his community to answer his questions concerning crucial points of the doctrine but was constantly referred to the foremost Manichean thinker, Faustus of Mileve, then living in Italy. When Faustus ultimately appeared, he frankly admitted that he was unable to solve Augustine's problems. Augustine's astronomical studies had revealed the non-rational nature of the Manichean explanation of the universe and celestial phenomena (*Confessiones* 5.5.8). Their so-called "Wisdom" turned out to be a mixture of myths and rather childish speculations. This does not mean, however, that during his nine years as an *auditor* he was only halfway a Manichean, as he later tried to make believe. He was skeptical, but still a believer.

The conversation with Faustus had a decisive influence on his attitude towards Manicheism. His *Confessiones* show that up to this time he had



scrupulously obeyed the Manichean commandments (*Confessiones* 3.10; 4.1). He refused with horror to kill even a fly (4.2.3). He used to defend the Manichean doctrines and was active in making proselytes (6.7.12). In that way he influenced his friend Alypius. He even wrote a treatise *De pulchro et apto*, based upon Manichean doctrines (4.13).

Augustine's intellectual difficulties were in part due to strong pressure from his mother Monica, a Christian, and some close friends. Monica had never ceased to hope that Augustine would ultimately embrace Christianity, under the influence of which he had been brought up, and his friend Nebridius pointed out the great logical difficulties inherent in the system of Mani. Under the influence of another friend he abandoned belief in astrology, which made him disbelieve Mani's astrological doctrines. In the West the Manicheans claimed to preach the true Christianity and on the basis of Marcion's criticism of both the Old and the New Testament, they argued in their exegesis that many important scriptural passages had been falsified. But they were not able to prove their assertions. Undoubtedly, Augustine was also impressed by the attitude of the majority of the population and the malevolent rumors spread among Christians about alleged sexual excesses among the *electi*. However, such rumors constitute a common topic of criticism and can not be relied upon. After the discussion with Faustus Augustine, already withdrawing from Manicheism, left North Africa for Italy, accompanied by his son, mother, and friends. After a stay at Rome, where he still had contacts with the Manichean community, he took up a position at Milan as professor of rhetoric. It was here that he abandoned Manicheism in favor of the ancient philosophers. The influence of Ambrosius, bishop of Milan, the tears of his mother, the study of Neoplatonism as expounded by the Christian philosopher Marius Victorinus carried him now definitely back to Christianity where he once had been a catechumen. At Easter 387 he was baptized by Ambrosius together with his son Adeodatus and his friend Alypius. He then returned via Ostia—where his mother died—to Africa with the intention to devote himself to the service of the Church. Appointed presbyter in 391, he was elected bishop of Hippo in 395. He died there in 430 during the invasion of the Teutonic Vandals.

After his conversion Augustine attacked Manicheism in a series of writings. In public disputations he exposed the Manichean dogmas to trenchant criticisms with the skill and ruthlessness of a trained rhetor and the dialectical ability of a philosopher. His most important anti-Manichean works are: *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum*, *De genesi contra Manichaeos*, *De moribus*



*Manichaeorum, De utilitate credendi, De duabus animabus, Contra Fortunatum, Contra Adimantum, Contra Epistulam Fundamenti, Contra Faustum, Contra Felicem, Contra Secundinum, De natura boni, De haeresibus* 46. Augustine also composed an abjuration formula to be used by former Manicheans. (See also *De libero arbitrio, De moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae, De vera religione, Enchiridion.*)

In his polemic Augustine discusses such problems as had caused him difficulties during his period as an *auditor*. He accordingly attacks those aspects of Manichean dogmatics he finds weak from a philosophical point of view, above all the lack of perfection he discovers in the idea of God and his kingdom in comparison with his enemy, the kingdom of Darkness with its redoubtable prince. Since God according to Mani is limited in so far as his kingdom borders on Darkness, Augustine argues that he is not perfect. Further, how can God be a pure spirit and incorporeal if he has a common border with a corporeal being? The Manichean theologians were unable to answer these objections for they lacked their opponent's philosophical training and had to defend a religious system based upon inherited Iranian mythology. In vain they tried to attack weak points in Christian dogmatics. Their position in the West was unfavorable, as they tried to teach Manicheism as the esoteric, true Christian doctrine; but in doing so they had recourse to Marcion's thesis of falsification of Scriptures without being able to demonstrate the correctness of this allegation. They were on safer ground when trying to show—after Marcion—the great difference between the Old and the New Testament. Their argumentation here followed arguments Mani had taken over from Marcion. In their argumentation with Augustine the Manicheans relied on exegesis whereas Augustine was especially strong in his philosophical arguments. With sharp irony Augustine criticizes the Manichean pantheon as well as the rich mythology of the system. The Manichean myths appear to him as a collection of naive, absurd, and partly obscene fables. Here again his opponents were placed in an impossible situation because they were not able to give a satisfactory interpretation of the inherited myths. As to the founder Mani's own position, Augustine underlines the fact that no Christian text mentions Mani as Apostle and still less as the promised Paraclete, a claim essential to his attitude vis-à-vis Christianity. Here again the Manicheans could only fall back on Mani's own assertions. Even though the Manichean Fortunatus displayed great skill in his disputation with Augustine, the general impression is that the Manicheans were helpless against an opponent who possessed the same dogmatic knowledge of their religion as they themselves



and who used all the methods dialectics could give him. Augustine's attacks are, on the whole, not unfair but he shows no understanding of the great religious problem at the bottom of the system, namely the necessity to explain the existence and cause of evil. Augustine's own solution that evil is only a privation of good, *privatio boni*, is dictated by his Neoplatonic position and is at least as difficult to justify as the Manichean position. On the whole, the nine years Augustine belonged to Manicheism, although leaving some traces in his Christian thinking, as is emphasized by some scholars (Baur, Harnack), influenced him much less strongly and deeply than Neoplatonism (see the summary given by Capelle).

For the study of Latin-speaking Manicheism Augustine remains an invaluable source, but it should always be remembered that the Manicheism he describes is not the original system as developed by Mani, but a later adaptation to Christianity. This fundamental fact is sometimes forgotten (e.g., by Decret). To Augustine himself it was always clear that Manicheism was a *fabula persica* (*Contra Secundinum*, chap. 2).

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