

Augustine and Hermes Trismegistus: An Inquiry into the Spirituality of Augustine's Hidden Years

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Abstract

This paper draws attention to the possible role of Hermetic writings in the spiritual development of Augustine (354–430). It first places his knowledge of Hermetica within the context of both 'orthodox' African Christianity (Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius) and contemporary Manichaeism. It then focuses on his dealing with Hermetic writings, ideas and expressions in writings such as the Confessions, the (now lost) *The Beautiful and the Harmonious*, and *Against Faustus*. In Augustine's later writing the *City of God*, one finds a two-fold appreciation of Hermes, which had a particular influence in subsequent centuries.

Keywords: Augustine; Hermetica; African Paganism; African Christianity (Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius); Manichaeism; Confessions; *The Beautiful and the Harmonious*; *Against Faustus*; *City of God*.

Young Augustine's Spiritual Development: Paganism and Catholicism

Augustine's spiritual development is remarkable in many respects. Born in Roman Africa as the son of a Christian mother and a pagan father, he received a Christian education. This fact is in itself noteworthy, for as a rule the father, in his capacity as *pater familias*, determined the religious orientation of the family.¹ In this case, however, mother Monnica set her Christian mark on the whole household.² Yet it was a peculiar kind of Christendom in which Augustine was raised: God was considered to be anthropomorphic;³ the Christian martyrs were highly venerated and regular meetings were held at their tombs;⁴ and the Sabbath was a fast day.⁵ Above all, the Christians of Augustine's upbringing stuck to a strictly literal understanding of Scripture as the new Christian Law. Briefly stated, one may say that young Augustine's Christian belief was both legalistic and orthodox, while modelled after his mother's faith.

A closer look at Augustine's first religious orientation may clarify its background. Mother Monnica was not as simple a person as some will have it. Although not a woman of letters, she was certainly wise and highly gifted.⁶ More about her religious convictions becomes clear as we consider her life story. She was born in 331 or 332 and got married to Patricius around 345. In those years the inhabitants of Thagaste were either pagan or Donatist. Compelled by the imperial laws, they

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¹ Cf. W.H.C. Frend, 'The Family of Augustine: a Microcosm of Religious Change in North Africa', *Congresso internazionale su s. Agostino...*, Atti, I, Rome 1987, 139.

² In the end, father Patricius became a Christian as well, but in his *Conf. A.* mentions this fact only as an aside. See *Conf. 2*, 6 and 9, 20.

³ See, e.g., *Conf. 5*, 19; 7, 1-2; 7, 3; 7, 7.

⁴ E.g. *Conf. 6*, 2.

⁵ *Conf. 6*, 2 and *ep. 36*, 32.

⁶ See, e.g., *b. vita 11*, 10 and 16, where A. makes mention of her intelligent comments during philosophical discussions.

converted to Catholicism in 348. For many of them, however, Catholicism was only a thin veneer. Monnica, too, stayed true to many of her old convictions and, in this way, influenced her son.⁷

Looking at the story of Monnica's life, we get a first impression of the religious milieu in which Augustine was raised. Paganism, in a variety of forms, remained a mighty force, most popular of which was the cult of the highest deity, Saturnus. This cult had some obvious Semitic features and even required human sacrifices.⁸ Alongside the Saturnus cult—and for an important part as its substitute—stood the strict and legalistic Donatism. Donatism had become the national Christian religion of the native Berber people, in much of its manifestations not only legalistic, but also biblicistic, and very negative towards Roman classical culture.⁹ Beside Donatism there was the Catholic Church, connected with Rome and closely linked with the rulers of state. With the help of the secular power, Catholicism became the dominant religion in 411, with paganism and Donatism remaining strong countercurrents. Apart of these mainstreams, Roman Africa housed many other religious movements, either under or above ground, and sometimes even within the official Catholic Church: this included a rather pluriform Jewish community; a considerable and influential group of Manichaeans; other Gnostics of a diverse spread; and certainly also adherents of—or in any case important experts on—Hermes Trismegistus. It is in particular the last mentioned group which will be at the centre of our attention. Here already it may be noticed that recent research has stressed the fact that Hermetic ideas and writings had an impact on young Augustine.

Focusing further on young Augustine's spiritual development, the following picture may be sketched. Apart from his religious teaching at home, Augustine was educated at school—a learning that was purely pagan. He received his primary education in Thagaste, and started his higher schooling in nearby Madauros. The school curriculum there consisted of the study of pagan authors such as Vergil, Cicero, Sallust and Terence. The religious outlook of these writers was not criticized, in any case not at school. To the contrary, Augustine's school education instilled in him a positive attitude towards the great authorities of Latin literature. This can be inferred, first and foremost, from a letter to Augustine by a certain Maximus, a grammarian at Madauros. His epistle to Augustine is included among the letters of Augustine.¹⁰ In all probability, Maximus' writing dates from 390, and in his letter the old¹¹ teacher speaks to his former pupil, who recently returned from Milan via Rome to Africa, and now is a confirmed Catholic Christian.

Maximus complains of the fact that Augustine turned away from his teachings (*qui a mea secta deviasti*),¹² the contents of which are briefly indicated. Maximus is neither a polytheist, nor does he literally accept the Greek myths. He believes, in stead, in one Most High God (*unum esse deum summum*),¹³ who is without beginning (*sine initio*), without natural offspring (*sine prole naturae*), the great and magnificent Father (*pater magnus atque magnificus*):

‘We invoke his powers, dispersed throughout the universe which He has made, by many names, because all of us do not know his real name. For the name “God” is common to all religions’.¹⁴

⁷ Cf. Frend, ‘Family’, 141. For an overview of Monnica's life based on the primary sources, see A. Mandouze (éd.), *Prosopographie chrétienne du Bas-Empire*, I, *Afrique* (303-33), Paris 1982, 758-762.

⁸ See, e.g., W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*, Oxford 1952 (1971²), 79.

⁹ Frend, *Donatist Church*, *passim*.

¹⁰ *Ep.* 16.

¹¹ For Maximus also being literally old, see *ep.* 16, 1 (‘... seniles artus...’) and 16,4 (‘... senex invalidus...’).

¹² *Ep.* 16, 4.

¹³ *Ep.* 16, 1.

¹⁴ *Ep.* 16, 1: ‘Huius nos virtutes per mundanum opus diffusas, multis vocabulis invocamus, quoniam nomen eius cuncti proprium videlicet ignoramus. Nam deus omnibus religionibus commune nomen est.’

In the words of this pagan, one hears the sounds which are also well known from Hermetic writings, and there seems reason to assume that the young Augustine of about fifteen years had already heard them.

‘May you—so Maximus concludes his letter—be preserved by the gods, through whom we all, who are mortals on this earth, in a thousandfold manner but still in harmony, revere and worship Him who is the common Father of the gods and of all mortals.’¹⁵

In Madauros they apparently knew how to theologize. Owing to African pride (in which Augustine no doubt shared¹⁶) the works of the famous fellow citizen Apuleius of Madauros, who was so well acquainted with the Hermetic writings, will have been on the school’s timetable. In any case, Augustine got a thorough knowledge of them,¹⁷ in particular Apuleius’ *De deo Socratis*. He extensively quotes from this work, for instance in books VIII and IX of his *City of God*, and in essence these quotes correspond with Maximus’ religious opinion. Space allows for only one citation:

‘He [Apuleius] affirms, indeed, that the supreme God, the Creator of all things, whom we call the true God, is spoken of by Plato as the only God. The poverty of human speech fails to even approximately describe Him. Even the wise, when their mental energy is as far as possible delivered from the shackles of the body, have only such gleams of insight into His nature as may be compared to a flash of lightning illumining the darkness.’¹⁸

It is telling that Augustine, in Book VIII of *City of God*, suddenly interrupts his ample discussion of Apuleius’ *On the God of Socrates* in order to quote copiously and with unparalleled precision¹⁹ from the Hermetic tract *Asclepius*.²⁰ Did this combination bring about the tract’s attribution to Apuleius already in the ninth century?²¹ A somewhat rapid glance at Book VIII of Augustine’s *City of God*, in particular at the first sentences of VIII, 23, may have been the cause for counting *Asclepius* as one of Apuleius’ writings.²²

As we will see, this brief aside is important to better understand Augustine’s later spirituality. The most important facts of his early religious development are still to be dealt with, however. We just spoke of a certain pagan influence, at school of a literary-philosophical (and hermetically coloured) nature, and in everyday life in the street of an ordinary pagan character.²³ In his answer to the just quoted letter of Maximus, Augustine accurately recounts from memory that the most important Olympian deities had their statues on Madauros’ forum,²⁴ and that during the Bacchanalia the city councillors (*decuriones*) and other dignitaries (*primates*) wandered about and abandoned

¹⁵ *Ep.* 16, 4: ‘Dii te servant, per quos et eorum atque cunctorum mortalium communem patrem, universi mortales, quos terra sustinet, mille modis concordia discordia veneramur et colimus.’

¹⁶ E.g. *ep.* 138, 19: ‘Apuleius ... qui nobis Afris Afer est notior ...’.

¹⁷ H. Hagendahl, *Augustine and the Latin Classics*, Goteborg 1967, 17- 28 and 680-689.

¹⁸ *DCD* 9, 16; cf. *De deo Socratis* 3.

¹⁹ Cf. A.D. Nock in: A.D. Nock / A.-J. Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum*, 11, *Traitéés XIII-XVIII, Asclepius*, Paris 1960², 264 ff.

²⁰ See *DCD* 8, 23, 24 and 25 with the quotes from *Asclepius* 23, 24 and 37.

²¹ Cf. Nock, *o.c.*, 259.

²² *DCD* 8, 23: ‘Nam diversa de illis Hermes Aegyptius, quem Trismegiston vocant, sensit et scripsit. Apuleius enim deos quidem illos negat’, etc. See also 8, 24 for the alternation of Hermes and Apuleius. One should be aware of the fact that, as a rule, (full) interpunction is lacking in old manuscripts.

²³ Esp. in *ep.* 232, 1 and 7, A. tells how the people of Madauros stuck to the cult of the old gods. Also many inscriptions mentioning the name of Saturnus testify to this fact.

²⁴ *Ep.* 17, 1. 26.

themselves to all sorts of extremities.²⁵ One may wonder if this was also the case in Thagaste where Augustine grew up as the son of a *curialis*, and whether this explains why his father, as a public person, stuck to his pagan convictions for so long. In any case, it may be clear that Patricius was not as weak and wavering a person as might be inferred from his longtime undecided religious stance. On the contrary, he was short-tempered, ambitious, and as a rule knew well what he wanted.²⁶

Augustine thus experienced pagan and possibly overt Hermetic influences through his education at school, through the impact of the street and the marketplace, and through the paternal example at home. Apart from these influences, however, it was in particular through the loving care and perseverance of Mōnnica that he was raised in a traditional, biblicistic and legalistic form of Christendom. The combination of all this no doubt caused tensions in his tender mind. Augustine's hesitation and inner struggle came to the surface when, one time as a boy, he was seriously ill and wanted to be baptized. However, as soon as the stomach cramps were over, his ardent longing passed away.²⁷ It is in particularly in crisis situations that his Christian upbringing became manifest. After a brief period of hesitation, however, all traditional Christendom was discarded when, in 373, he found himself as a student in Carthage.

Augustine as a Manichaeian

It was in Carthage that Augustine became an adherent of the gnostic world religion of Manichaeism. We could have been aware of the essential nature of Manichaeism for centuries, thanks to the many times that Augustine wrote in considerable detail about this type of Christian belief. It is also from his writings that we learn that the Manichaeians venerated Hermes Trismegistus as a prophet who announced the Christ. As a matter of fact, we will come back to this highly important detail. First, however, we will sketch the way in which Manichaeism presented itself as a *Christian* religion.

When studying Augustine's writings, one is surprised that, for such a long time, scholars have been nearly completely blind to this essential feature. For, in actual fact, Augustine portrays Manichaeism as a fully Christian religion in which Christ as the Teacher of Wisdom stands at the centre. The Christian element in Manichaeism was not an accommodation to a Christian environment,²⁸ but appears to be present everywhere.²⁹ Some decades ago, it has been corroborated through the discovery of the *Cologne Mani Codex* and, recently again, through the excavations at Kellis in Egypt.³⁰ From these and other documents, we know that Mani was impressed by the figure of Jesus and considered him to be one of the Prophets on whom the Paraclete³¹ had descended and in whose footsteps he himself came as the Seal of the Prophets.³² A close reading of Augustine's

²⁵ *Ep.* 17, 4.

²⁶ For the essential data regarding Patricius, see Mandouze, *PAC* (n. 7), 833-834.

²⁷ *Conf.* 1, 17.

²⁸ Thus the opinion of L.H. Grondijs, 'Numidian Manichaeism in Augustinus' Time', *NTT* 9 (1954/1955) 21-42; *idem*, 'Analyse du manichéisme numidien au IV^e siècle', *Augustinus Magister*, III, Paris 1955, 391-419.

²⁹ Not only in Africa or Italy, but also in Egypt, Turfan (East Turkestan) and China. See E. Waldschmidt / W. Lentz, *Die Stellung Jesu im Manichäismus*, Berlin 1926; E. Rose, *Die manichäische Christologie*, Wiesbaden 1979.

³⁰ See, e.g., I. Gardner, *Kellis Literary Texts*, Oxford 2007, and, for the most interesting *Prayer of the Emanations*, *idem*, 'Manichaeian Ritual Practice at Ancient Kellis: A New Understanding of the Meaning and Function of the so-called *Prayer of the Emanations*', in: J.A. van den Berg a.o. (eds.), *In Search of Truth: Augustine, Manichaeism and other Gnosticism. Studies for Johannes van Oort at Sixty*, Leiden-Boston 2011, 245-262.

³¹ See, e.g., J. van Oort, 'The Paraclete Mani as the Apostle of Jesus Christ and the Origins of a New Christian Church', in: A. Hilhorst (ed.), *The Apostolic Age in Patristic Thought*, Leiden-Boston 2004, 139-157.

³² See, e.g., G. Stroumsa, "'Seal of the Prophets": The Nature of a Manichaeian Metaphor', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 7 (1986) 61-74; C. Colpe, 'Das Siegel der Propheten', in T. Kronholm & E. Riad (eds.), *On the Dignity of Man. Oriental and Classical Studies in Honour of F. Rundgren*, *OrSuec* 33-35 (1984-'86), 71-83; *idem*, *Das Siegel der Propheten. Historische Beziehungen zwischen Judentum, Judenchristentum, Heidentum und frühem Islam*, Berlin 1990.

writings against the Manichaeans reveals many aspects of the high esteem the Manichaeans had for several New Testament writings, the letters of Paul in particular. Nearly a century ago, in 1918, a Manichaean manuscript full of Pauline citations was discovered near Tébessa in Algeria. Its first editor supposed it to be a lost writing of a Latin church father from the 4th century.³³ In the same year, the leading Augustinian scholar André Wilmart even went further and specified: ‘I think that these African fragments (...) constitute the rest of a polemical tract against the Manichaeans and I am inclined to consider this to be a writing of a disciple of saint Augustine’.³⁴ So Christian were the Manichaeans, and so deeply inspired by the Pauline epistles, that even 20th century scholars did not see the difference from ‘orthodox’ Catholic writings!³⁵

In light of these facts, Manichaeism’s attractiveness for Augustine may be indicated in only a few words. On the one hand, it was its anti-legalistic character, *i.e.*, its proclamation of freedom from the Law that appealed to Augustine, and in this way he followed in the footsteps of Mani himself.³⁶ On the other hand, it was its Christ-centered piety. In this Christian Church, Jesus was portrayed as the true Teacher of Wisdom, who enlightens and grants Gnosis to humankind. Once man has arisen from his forgetfulness, he will get full control of his ‘self’ and be able to release himself from his earthly fetters. Christ was depicted as being the centre of this process.³⁷

It is not necessary to describe in detail the way in which the Manichaeans in Carthage presented their religion to the adolescent Augustine. In his *Confessions* and elsewhere, he himself explains that they pretended to proclaim the Truth in a *rational* manner; that they put forward many huge tomes to impress their hearers; that in their disputes they showed, by means of some sort of sturdy rationalism, the ‘absurdities’ of the Old Testament and the contradictions between the Old and the New Testaments; that they claimed to be able to provide a rational explanation of questions such as ‘*unde malum*’ (whence is evil?); and, not least, that by means of their compelling music and songs they praised Christ as the Saviour. Apparently, Augustine had not learned such things at home. It was for this reason that the young man in search of truth and wisdom changed his mind within a few days.³⁸

Why did Augustine become a Manichaean so suddenly? Part of the reason will be his personal circumstances. The young Augustine was a man in search of truth;³⁹ his reading of Cicero’s *Hortensius* had kindled a strong desire for wisdom, and he hoped to find this wisdom in the Bible. The language, style and contents of Holy Scripture became a bitter disappointment to him, however, and so it happened that the young student converted, within a few days,⁴⁰ to a new, spiritual, purportedly rational, fully fledged *gnostic* form of Christianity.

Gnostic-Hermetic Christendom in Africa before Augustine: Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius

³³ H. Omont, ‘Fragments d’un très ancien manuscrit latin provenant de l’Afrique du Nord’, *CRAI* 1918, 241-250.

³⁴ *CRAI* 1918, 304-305. Also, Wilmart here rightly remarks: ‘Le deuxième livre se présente comme une suite de citations de *Épîtres* de Saint Paul’.

³⁵ See further: F. Decret, ‘Aspects de l’Église manichéenne. Remarques sur le Manuscrit de Tébessa’, in: A. Zumkeller (Hg.), *Signum pietatis*, Würzburg 1989, 123-151; J. BeDuhn & G. Harrison, ‘The Tebessa Codex: A Manichaean Treatise on Biblical Exegesis and Church Order’, in: P. Mirecki & J. BeDuhn (eds.), *Emerging from Darkness. Studies in the Recovery of Manichaean Sources*, Leiden-New York-Köln 1997, 33-87.

³⁶ Cf. F. Decret, ‘L’Utilisation des *Épîtres* de Paul chez les Manichéens d’Afrique’, in: J. Ries a.o., *Le Epistole Paoline nei Manichei, i Donatisti e il primo Agostino*, Rome 1989 (2000²), 35-37.

³⁷ See, e.g., J.P. de Menasce, ‘Augustin manichéen’, in: *Freundesgabe für Ernst Robert Curtius*, Bern 1956, 79-93.

³⁸ Further exposition and analysis in: J. van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon. A Study of Augustine’s City of God and the Sources of his Doctrine of the Two Cities*, Leiden-Boston 2013², 33-47.

³⁹ Cf. *Conf.* 3, 10: ‘o veritas, veritas, quam intime etiam tum medullae animi mei suspirabant tibi ...’.

⁴⁰ Cf. *duab. an.* 1: ‘... ne tam facile ac diebus paucis religionis verissimae semina ... ex animo expellerentur’.

We may note, first of all, that Gnosticism was by no means a new phenomenon in Roman Africa. Gnostic Christendom had, instead, a considerably long tradition there.⁴¹ Proceeding from a more or less Platonic and Hermetic tradition, which paved the way, it is quite understandable that Gnostic Christianity, such as that propagated by the Manichaeans, was so successful, particularly in intellectual circles.

In order to gain the right perspective, we will make a brief ‘tour d’horizon’ of the history of Christianity in Roman Africa. One of its first protagonists was Tertullian (c. 200, Carthage). In Tertullian’s day the church of Carthage was deeply divided: there was a gnostic current—a multifarious stream against which Tertullian reacted strongly. Apart from this, there was a rigoristic current of which Tertullian, in the end a Montanist, increasingly became the mouthpiece. There also was a third party, the Catholics, branded by Tertullian as the ‘halves’, the *psychici* or ‘soul people’, without the true Spirit. Later, in Augustine’s time, we still see this tripartition. The rigorists, by then particularly found in the Donatist Church, rejected all profane wisdom: they kept themselves to a literal and legalistic interpretation of the Bible; the still varied Gnostic current was openminded to all kinds of ‘wisdom’ (including Hermetism), which was incorporated into their systems as much as possible; the Catholics formed the middle-of-the-road party.

Tertullian

Tertullian is the first African person of whom we know that was acquainted with the figure of Hermes and, in all probability, with Hermetic writings. In his work *Against the Valentinians*, he states the following:

‘Well, now, the Pythagoreans may learn, the Stoics may know, and also Plato himself, whence matter, which they assert to be unborn [*innatam*], derived both its origin and substance for all this pile of the world—(a mystery) which not even the renowned Mercurius Trismegistus, master of all physical philosophy, thought out.’⁴²

There are other statements of Tertullian similar to this one, in particular in his work *De anima*. Here he communicates, for instance, that Hermes the Egyptian was a disciple of Plato.⁴³ Because of this and other testimonies one may conclude that Tertullian did not merely hear about the Hermetic writings,⁴⁴ but rather that he himself knew Hermetic passages and perhaps even whole tracts.

Cyprian

In Roman Africa, however, Tertullian was by no means the only one. Also in the writings of the very honourable bishop Cyprian, later venerated by the Donatist party in particular, one reads a passage in which Hermes is mentioned and Hermetic thought passed on:

⁴¹ W.H.C. Frend, ‘The Gnostic-Manichaean Tradition in Roman North Africa’, *JEH* 4(1953) 13-26 (also in Frend, *Religion Popular and Unpopular in the Early Christian Centuries*, London 1976, Ch. XII).

⁴² *Adv. Valent.* 15, 1. Cf. A.S. Ferguson in: W. Scott & A.S. Ferguson, *Hermetica*, IV, *Testimonia*, Oxford 1936, 3 and, for instance, J.-C. Fredouille in his commentary on *Adversus Valentinianos*, Paris 1981, 281.

⁴³ *De anima* 2, 3: ‘... ut Mercurium Aegyptium, cui praecipue Plato adsuevit ...’. Cf. e.g. *De anima* 15, 5: 28, 1; 33, 2. See in particular J. H. Waszink, *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani De anima*, edited with introduction and commentary, Amsterdam 1947 (repr. Leiden-Boston 2010), among others 47*.

⁴⁴ Such was still the meaning of J. Carcopino, *Aspects mystiques de la Rome païenne*, Paris 1941, 291: ‘.qu’il [sc. Tertullien] le connaissait encore mal et par oui-dire’.

‘Moreover, Hermes Trismegistus speaks of one God, and confesses that He is incomprehensible, and beyond our estimation.’⁴⁵

It should be noted that Cyprian was not an original theologian. Precisely in this part of his tract *Quod idola dii non sint* (That Idols are not Gods), he copies from a predecessor in the Christian tradition, *i.e.*, Minucius Felix. Curiously, however, in Minucius Felix’ dialogue *Octavius*, exactly these words are lacking,⁴⁶ and thus one should conclude that they have been interpolated. Moreover, several scholars are of the opinion that *Quod idola* is not a work from Cyprian’s hand.⁴⁷ Both Jerome and Augustine, however, already quoted the work as being written by Cyprian. As far as Augustine is concerned, he quotes *Quod idola* in his work *De baptismo* precisely with the just mentioned passage on Hermes Trismegistus.⁴⁸ In his highly esteemed overview of Hermetic *testimonia*, Alexander Stewart Ferguson does not list the Augustinian quote, which is a serious omission because Augustine’s *De baptismo* was highly influential in later centuries,⁴⁹ and in this way the quote became widely known. As for the problem of an interpolation in Cyprian’s text: it was not only Augustine who considered the quote on Hermes to be appropriate: in the second part of his youthful work *De idola*, Cyprian himself sets forth his view that there is only one God, who is beyond our comprehension.⁵⁰

These remarks have been based on one Hermetic quote only. Space will not allow a discussion of every quote from the Hermetica in the same detail. The works of the next two notable persons from Africa’s church also contain many quotes from the Hermetic writings, sometimes even whole paragraphs.

Arnobius

The first case in point is Arnobius. Tradition tells that he was the tutor of Lactantius,⁵¹ and he is even said to have converted directly from Hermetism to Christianity.⁵² Reading his only work which is preserved for posterity, the seven books *Adversus nationes*, one may understand this tradition. He seems to have written this work to meet the objections of the bishop of Sicca in Numidia when, sometime between 300 and 310, he wished to become a Christian. In his hometown, this famous rhetor was known as an adversary of the Christian church, a fact that naturally gave rise to objections. The local Christians will also have had certain doubts in regard to his ‘new’ belief. Nevertheless, Arnobius became a ‘Catholic’ Christian, although he hardly knew anything of the contents of the Bible. Likewise, his teachings do not give proof of typical Christian tenets.⁵³ In actual fact, he did little more than expound his syncretistic, often Platonic, but—in all probability—also

⁴⁵ *Quod idola dii non sint* 6: ‘Hermes quoque Trismegistus unum Deum loquitur, eumque incomprehensibilem adque inaestimabilem confitetur’. Cf. Ferguson, *Hermetica*, IV, 6.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Octavius* 26, 7 - 27, 1.

⁴⁷ But see, e.g., H. Koch, *Cyprianische Untersuchungen*, Bonn 1926, 1-78.

⁴⁸ *De bapt.* VI, 44, 87.

⁴⁹ I only mention here the 16th c. reformers Luther (cf. H.-U. Delius, *Augustin als Quelle Luthers*, Berlin 1984, 166-168) and Calvin (cf. L. Smits, *Saint Augustin dans l’oeuvre de Jean Calvin*, 2, Assen 1958, 157-158), but also in the writing on which much medieval theology was based, sc. Lombardus’ *Sententiae*, *De baptismo* is in high esteem.

⁵⁰ *Quod idola dii non sint* 8-9.

⁵¹ Hieronymus, *De viris illustribus* 79-80; *Ep.* 70, 5.

⁵² Carcopino, *Aspects mystiques*, 293.

⁵³ P. Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l’Afrique chrétienne*, III, Paris 1905 (repr. Bruxelles 1963), 266: ‘Un premier trait original, c’est que la doctrine de cet apologiste n’a presque rien de chrétien.’

Hermetically coloured beliefs under the cover of Christianity.⁵⁴ In a striking way, he addresses those who may be considered to be his former fellows:

‘To you, to you I address myself, who follows after Mercury, Plato and Pythagoras, and you others, who are of one mind with them and harmoniously walk in the same beliefs.’⁵⁵

It is noteworthy that here—as we saw it in Tertullian and will see in Lactantius—the classical Hermetic tradition may be heard, which says that Hermes Trismegistus was the forerunner of Plato and Pythagoras. It is all the more noteworthy that, according to Arnobius, apart of the highest God, the Father and Lord of everything,⁵⁶ there are other gods who did come forth from Him.⁵⁷ Besides, Arnobius—similar also in this case to the Hermetic writings⁵⁸—emphasizes that religious worship should be spiritual, i.e., without altars, sacrifices, incense, etc.⁵⁹ In particular, Arnobius is of the opinion that God is not the creator of the human soul, but that the soul is the product of a Demiurg.⁶⁰

As a matter of fact, it would be possible to derive the figure of the Demiurg from Platonism, but Arnobius is just polemizing *against* the opinion of Plato and the Neoplatonists, who consider the soul to be immortal.⁶¹ According to Arnobius, the human soul has a mixed character: she is a *medietas*, a ‘middle’: although with a body, she is divine; although transient, she has the potency of immortality. She does not come from God, but she is able to exalt herself to God. It is impossible to label all these opinions as being orthodox Christian, but they are in striking conformity with the Hermetic writings.⁶² In the *Asclepius*, one even reads the same term: *medietas*.⁶³

Arnobius, then, was an odd Christian theologian, and it is no surprise that the well-known *Decretum Gelasianum* counted his *Adversus nationes* among the apocryphal writings.⁶⁴ Even so, this writing was first printed in Rome ‘*apud Franciscum Priscianum Florentinum*’ in 1542, shortly after that twice in Basle (1546, 1560), in 1582 en 1604 in Antwerp, in 1651 and the following years in Leiden⁶⁵ and, moreover, translated into Dutch by Joachim Oudaen, a Mennonite connected with the Rijnsburg Collegiants, under the title: *Arnobius d’Afrikaner tegen de Heydenen verrat in zeven boecken* (Harlingen 1677).⁶⁶ Although, as far as I am aware, Arnobius nowhere *expressis verbis* quotes from the Hermetic writings, his ideas seem to be permeated with them. In this way the ‘church father’

⁵⁴ It may be noted, however, that G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind*, Cambridge 1986 (repr. Princeton 1993), 200, concludes: ‘Whether he [sc. Arnobius] had any personal experience of either Hermetists or Hermetica we cannot know.’

⁵⁵ *Adv. nat.* 2, 13: ‘... vos, vos appello, qui Mercurium, qui Platonem Pythagoramque sectamini, vosque ceteros, qui estis unius mentis et per easdem vias placitorum inceditis unitate.’

⁵⁶ *Adv. nat.* 3, 3: ‘... deus primus, deus, inquam, primus, pater rerum ac dominus ...’.

⁵⁷ E.g. *Adv. nat.* 1, 28: ‘Quod si fixum et ratum est, erit nobis consequens confiteri et deos esse nativos et a principe rerum fonte ortus sui originem ducere’. For other texts and the context of this idea, see J.M.P.B. van Putten, ‘Arnobe croyait-il à l’existence des dieux païens?’, *VC* 25 (1971) 52-55. Cf. e.g. *Asclepius* 23.

⁵⁸ E.g. *Asclepius* 41.

⁵⁹ E.g. *Adv. nat.* 6, 1 and 3.

⁶⁰ *Adv. nat.* 2, 26.

⁶¹ *Adv. nat.* 2, 14-15.

⁶² Cf. Carcopino, *Aspects mystiques*, 298-299.

⁶³ *Asclepius* 5.

⁶⁴ Cf. J. Quasten, *Patrology*, II, Utrecht-Antwerp 1953, 386.

⁶⁵ See, e.g., Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire*, III (n. 53), 241; *ANF*, I, 410; G.E. MacCracken (transl.), *Arnobius of Sicca, The Case against the Pagans*, Westminster (Md.) 1949, 54 vv. The year of the *editio princeps* was either 1542 (so the colophon) or 1543 (date of the Preface); the edition was by F. Sabaeus and preceded by a letter to king Francis I of France.

⁶⁶ Cf., e.g., Quasten, *Patrology*, II, 387.

Arnobius was, during many centuries, a highly important source for the dissemination of views which are either purely Hermetic or, in any case, closely related to Hermetism.

Lactantius

All this *a fortiori* goes for Lactantius, the well-known disciple of Arnobius and rhetor, who since the time of the first Humanists has been venerated as ‘the Christian Cicero’. Without a doubt, this important precursor of Augustine thoroughly knew the Hermetic writings. What is more, he extensively quoted from them, particularly in his main work *Divinae institutiones*. One may even say that, if no original Hermetic text would have been handed down, we could get a fair impression of its contents via Lactantius.⁶⁷ This African is also highly interesting because, in his Latin works, he hands down Greek quotes, both from well-known and (from elsewhere) unknown Hermetic writings. Moreover, he is of particular importance because he either quotes the archetype of the Latin *Asclepius*, i.e. the Greek *Logos teleios*, in Greek, or renders it in his own Latin translation.

Most important, of course, is what Lactantius reveals about Hermes and the contents of the Hermetica. Although he purports to be fully Christian, and—because he knows much more of the Bible and Christian doctrine—is much more ‘orthodox’ than Arnobius, his praise for Hermes is not small:

‘I have no doubt that Trismegistus arrived at the truth by some proof of this kind, he [Trismegistus] who in regard to God the Father said all, and in regard to the Son many things, which are contained in the divine secrets [*i.e.*, the Scriptures].’⁶⁸

Elsewhere he states that Hermes Trismegistus is ‘an appropriate witness’ (*idoneus testis*) in the question of how we should sacrifice: Trismegistus,

‘who agrees with us, that is with the prophets, whom we follow, as much in fact as in words.’⁶⁹

Again at another place, in the beginning of his *Institutiones*, Lactantius says:

‘This [Trismegistus] wrote books, many books indeed, on the knowledge of divine things, in which he asserts the majesty of the supreme and only God, and makes mention of Him by the same names which we use, namely God and Father.’⁷⁰

It is incorrect to characterise Lactantius as a Hermetist on the basis of these remarks. Yet it is difficult to call him an average ‘orthodox’ Catholic Christian. Evidently, the former rhetor is not a specialist in dogmatic questions. He holds, for instance, a deviating opinion on a thousand years reign of Christ at the end of time and does not seem to have any idea of the Catholic concept of

⁶⁷ See, e.g., the texts collected by Ferguson, *o.c.* (n. 42), 9-27 en Nock *o.c.* (n. 19), 105-114. A convenient overview of all quotes and other testimonies in A. Wlosok, *Laktanz und die philosophische Gnosis*, Heidelberg 1960, 261-262. See also Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 205-209.

⁶⁸ *Div. Inst.* IV, 27, 20: ‘Ego vero non dubito quin ad veritatem Trismegistus hac aliqua ratione pervenerit, qui de deo patre omnia, de filio locutus est multa quae divinis continentur arcanis.’

⁶⁹ *Div. Inst.* VI, 25, 10: ‘Hoc autem duplex sacrificii genus quam sit verissimum, Trismegistus Hermes idoneus testis est, qui nobiscum, id est cum prophetis quos sequimur, tam re quam verbis congruit.’ Etc.

⁷⁰ *Div. Inst.* I, 6, 4: ‘Hic scripsit libros et quidem multos ad cognitionem divinarum rerum pertinentes, in quibus maiestatem summi ac singularis dei asserit isdemque nominibus appellat quibus nos divinum et patrem.’

Trinity, for in his ‘theology’ he confuses the Spirit with the Father or the Word.⁷¹ Should we, perhaps, for (part of) these curious opinions refer to Hermetic influences?⁷² In any case, it is clear that Lactantius was a Christian who, in his apology of and introduction to the Christian doctrine, gave prominence to philosophical and ‘gnostic’ thoughts.⁷³ According to him, Hermes is a prophet who—in a way congenial to Christians—pointed out the true spiritual⁷⁴ religion, which has been fully revealed in Christ; he applies a ‘gnostic’-Hermetic idea of religion to Christianity; the true worshipper of God (*cultor Dei*) exactly corresponds to the pious ‘gnostic’ of the Hermetica.⁷⁵

One may infer: Was perhaps this forerunner of Augustine *once* himself a Hermetist? It might be possible. At the same time, however, it may be noted that Lactantius’ unbiased speaking of Hermes seems to indicate that, when he was in his flourishing years (c. 300-315), the thriving period of Hermetism was over.⁷⁶ Already before 297 the Manichaeans became active on the African continent, and it was they who consciously incorporated previous ‘gnostic’ and Hermetic ideas into their new Christian religion.⁷⁷

Manichaeism, Hermeticism, and Augustine

After the above overview of Augustine’s precursors, we may be able to better see his own acquaintance with Hermetism during his ‘hidden years’. In 373, Augustine became a Manichaean, *i.e.*, an adherent of a dualistic world religion. For an important part he even became its propagandist.⁷⁸ His religious longings were satisfied among the followers of Mani. Moreover, they offered him a ‘rational’ explanation of all his difficulties.

Philosophical speculation, astronomic-astrologic knowledge, a Christ-centered piety and, for instance, a strict asceticism were the characteristics of this ‘Gnosis’. In principal, this syncretistic Christianity was open for religious revelation and knowledge from elsewhere. It is in this context that Augustine raises part of the veil of Manichaeism by indicating that—not least—the Manichaeans assigned special authority to Hermes Trismegistus.

Around 400 Augustine composed a circumstantially polemical work, namely his 33 books *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*. A pivotal point in his debate with the Manichaeans was the significance of the Old Testament. Does it have meaning for Christians, and in which way? Faustus completely denied any validity of the Old Testament prophecies. Even if they are true, they are only relevant to the Jews, not to the Christians coming from paganism:

‘We are by nature Gentiles, as Paul says, of the uncircumcision [cf. Eph 2:11], born under another law and with other prophets, whom the Gentiles call seers (*vates*), and from them we were afterwards converted to Christianity. (...) Thus, as I have said, the testimonies of the Hebrews contribute nothing to the Christian Church, which consists more of Gentiles than of Jews. Surely, if there are, as rumour has it (*ut fama est*), some prophecies about Christ from the

⁷¹ Cf. Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire*, III, 336; for Lactantius’ chiliastism, see V. Fabrega, ‘Die chiliastische Lehre des Laktanz’, *JbAC* 17(1974) 126-146.

⁷² Cf. Carcopino, *Aspects mystiques*, 292.

⁷³ Cf. van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon* (n. 38), 284-291.

⁷⁴ Both Hermes and true Christians reject outward cultic signs such as incense. See *Div. Inst.* VI, 25, 11 and *Asclepius* 41.

⁷⁵ Cf. the concluding remarks of Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 222 ff. 73. Cf. Carcopino, *Aspects mystiques*, 292.

⁷⁶ Cf. Carcopino, *Aspects mystiques*, 292.

⁷⁷ See, e.g., Friend, ‘Gnostic-Manichaean Tradition’, 16.

⁷⁸ A. persuaded several friends and also his benefactor Romanianus to become Manichaeans.

Sibyl, or from Hermes called Trismegistus, or Orpheus, or any pagan poet, they could to some extent help the faith of those who, like us, are converts from paganism to Christianity.⁷⁹

The Jewish *testimonia*, according to Faustus, are of no avail to us, for we do not need them.⁸⁰ In actual fact, Faustus does not explicitly say that he himself was acquainted with Hermes, and Augustine—who from his meeting with Faustus did not get a high impression of his learning⁸¹—sharply-ironically puts his finger on the weak spot of his argument.⁸² Notwithstanding this criticism, we may notice that Faustus allows ample space to pagan wisdom, and considers Hermes to be a prophet, who announces the Christ. In his answer to Faustus, Augustine not only endorses this view, but also adds that such prophecies are misleading: they are useful to counter the *vanitas* of the pagans, but cannot lead us to assign any authority to these persons.⁸³ We will encounter that same opinion some years later in his *City of God*.

Does this perhaps mean that, already as a Manichaean, Augustine became acquainted with Hermetic writings? The just quoted passage proves that, among the Manichaeans, Hermes was being venerated as a prophet. Although bishop Faustus only tells that he *heard* about him—*ut fama est*: as is said!—, it may be possible that Augustine, who was so much more learned than his Manichaean bishop, read Hermetic writings already as a Manichaean. As we have just seen, these writings were well known in Roman Africa. Moreover, through a testimony of Ephrem the Syrian, who composed his *Hymns Against Heresies* in Edessa around 370, we know for sure that the Manichaeans were well acquainted with Hermes Trismegistus:

‘... for they [the Manichaeans] say of Egyptian Hermes and of the Greek Plato and of Jesus who appeared in Judaea that “they were heralds of that Good (Realm) to the world”’.⁸⁴

As regards Augustine, we can say even more. It is not only highly probable, but almost certain that he became acquainted with Hermetica already as a Manichaean. While he does not explicitly mention Hermes in his *Confessions*, one finds in this writing with its many anti-Manichaean words and passages the expression ‘the living death’ (*Confessiones* 1, 7: *mortem vitalem*). As far as I know, this expression occurs nowhere else than in the Hermetic tract VII, 2:

‘But first you must tear off from you the evil which you are wearing: the cloak of ignorance, the ground of bad, the chain of corruption, the dark prison, the living death (*ton zōnta thanaton*),

⁷⁹ Faustus *apud* A.’s, *C. Faust.* XIII, I: ‘porro autem nos natura gentiles sumus, id est, quod Paulus praepetium uocat, sub alia nati lege et praefatoribus aliis, quos gentilitas uates appellat, atque ex his postea sumus ad christianismum conuersi (...) ita nihil, ut dixi, ecclesiae christianae Hebraeorum testimonia conferunt, quae magis constet ex gentibus quam ex Iudaeis. sane si sunt aliqua, ut fama est. Sibyllae de Christo praesagia aut Hermetis, quem dicunt Trismegistum, aut Orphei aliorumque in gentilitate uatum, haec nos aliquanto ad fidem iuuare poterunt, qui ex gentibus efficimur christiani?’

⁸⁰ *C. Faust.* XIII, I (end).

⁸¹ *Conf.* 5, 11.

⁸² *C. Faust.* XIII, 17: ‘Horum ergo iste litteras [sc. of Hermes Trismegistus and others] nesciens, quandoquidem per famam putati esse aliquos tales, non eas utique legeret...’. W.H.C. Frend, ‘Pythagoreanism and Hermetism in Augustine’s Hidden Years’, *SP* XXII, Leuven 1989, 251-260, makes another impression (254): he does not mention the just quoted text and XIII, 1 only in an incomplete translation.

⁸³ *C. Faust.* XIII, 15.

⁸⁴ Translation as in J.C. Reeves, *Heralds of That Good Realm. Syro-Mesopotamian Gnosis and Jewish Traditions*, Leiden-Boston 1996, 12. Cf. F.C. Burkitt’s rendering in C.W. Mitchell a.o., *S. Ephraim’s Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan*, II, London 1921, 98: ‘... for they say about Hermes in Egypt, and about Plato among the Greeks, and about Jesus who appeared in Judaea, that “they are Heralds of the Good to the world”’.

the corpse of sensation, the tomb you carry with you ...'.⁸⁵

The expression 'the living death' here refers to the body. Exactly the same goes for the passage in Augustine's *Confessions*:

'What, Lord, do I wish to say, except that I do not know whence I came here,⁸⁶ in this (how shall I call it?) dying life or *living death*?⁸⁷

One may also understand why Augustine states later in the *Confessions* that the Manichaeans were people 'who loved a dying life [*vitam mortuam*]'.⁸⁸ As so many words and phrases in this wonderful writing have an anti-Manichaean tenor, this seems to go for this expression as well. Only Manichaeans acquainted with the Hermetica will have understood the polemical pointer.

'The Beautiful and the Harmonious': A Hermetically Coloured Debut?

But there is more. In view of the likely fact that Augustine became acquainted with Hermetica already as a Manichaean, it is highly interesting to briefly rethink the contents of his firstling *De pulchro et apto*. As we may infer from the *Confessions*, he wrote this earliest fruit of his immense literary activity around 381, when he was 'about 26 or 27 years old'.⁸⁹ By the time he authored his *Confessions*, however, he had forgotten whether *De pulchro et apto* covered two or three books.⁹⁰ Apparently the heretical(!) work had soon gone astray, a state of affairs which has lasted until today. Luckily, however, Augustine reminds us of its contents in his *Confessions* in a rather detailed manner. Briefly stated, the work deals with 'beauty' as the quality of bodies (*corpora*). In dealing with this subject, the question is raised how the diverse parts of the body fit together and complement each other into a harmonious whole. Augustine tells about his pondering of the subject:

'And my mind searched through the corporeal forms, and I defined and distinguished the beautiful as that which is fitting in itself and the harmonious as that which fits because it is adapted to something else, and I supported my distinction by examples drawn from the body.'⁹¹

All this sounds rather abstract, but much becomes clearer when we compare with a surprising parallel from the Hermetic tractate V, 7. After the genesis of the human body has been described, the Hermetist speaks of the beauty and harmony of the end result: 'all is very beautiful, all with the right dimensions'. In other words, here too is spoken '*de pulchro et apto*', 'On the Beautiful and Harmonious'. Accordingly, it is in this way that the title of the book is best translated.⁹² Furthermore, it is noteworthy that in this work Augustine speaks of the Supreme Good as a Monad (ultimate,

⁸⁵ Cf. Frend, 'Family', 147, but with a number of inaccuracies; see also Frend's 'Pythagoreanism and Hermetism', 259.

⁸⁶ Sc. in this body or flesh: *caro*.

⁸⁷ *Conf.* 1, 7: 'Quid enim est quod volo dicere, domine, nisi quia nescio, unde venerim huc, in istam dico vitam mortalem an mortem vitalem?'

⁸⁸ *Conf.* 5, 14.

⁸⁹ *Conf.* 4, 27

⁹⁰ *Conf.* 4, 20.

⁹¹ *Conf.* 4, 24: 'Et ibat animus per formas corporeas et pulchrum, quod per se ipsum, aptum autem, quod ad aliquod adcommodatum deceret, definiebam et distinguebam et exemplis corporeis adstruebam'.

⁹² Other translations: 'On the Beautiful and the Fitting' (e.g. H. Chadwick); 'On the fair and the fit' (E.B. Pusey).

indivisible Unity), while the same is found in the Hermetica.⁹³ Would it be pure chance that Augustine, when he describes how he dedicated his firstling to a certain Hierius, states: ‘*Grande profundum est ipse homo*’, ‘man is a vast deep’?⁹⁴ This dictum strikingly coincides with the famous saying well known from the Hermetic *Asclepius*: ‘man is a great miracle’.⁹⁵

Augustine and Hermes: Appreciation and Depreciation

All this data seem to demonstrate one and the same fact, namely that Augustine got acquainted with Hermetic ideas and, perhaps, even with Hermetic writings already during his hidden years. Yet it may be possible to see more and other influences. In 1930, the well-known scholar of Neoplatonism, Willy Theiler, published his study *Die Vorbereitung des Neuplatonismus*.⁹⁶ In this book, he draws attention to striking parallels between Tractate V (4-11) of the Hermetica and the beginning of the *Confessions* (1,2-12). If this means that the Hermetic tractate was indeed Augustine’s real source, then the thesis could be defended that the Hermetica strongly inspired the Christian mystical tradition, for these first chapters of the *Confessions* indeed had a great influence on Western mysticism. It seems better, however, to speak of striking parallels rather than straightforward dependence. In the same manner the texts speak of the formation of the human body by God (*CH V*, 4-8; *Conf.* 1, 2.7.10), of God’s transcendence (*CH V*, 9; *Conf.* 1, 4), and of his antithetical qualities (*CH V*, 9; *Conf.* 1, 4). One finds all these parallels in Middle Platonic writers such as Albinus and Numenius as well.⁹⁷ Or should we follow Theiler in his assumption that Augustine was perhaps inspired by a now lost Hermetic tractate?⁹⁸ Of course it might be possible that such a tractate will be discovered, but for the time being it seems better to value the previously mentioned testimonies.

In all probability, Augustine knew Hermetica already in his Manichaean years and disclosed this knowledge in his *Confessions* in an ingenious literary way. Based on this early knowledge, he was able to speak as an authority on Hermetic matters in *Contra Faustum*. In this way, we also understand why in *De baptismo* he not only quotes Cyprian’s positive words on Hermes, but also defends them: pagans can speak in a ‘perfect’ [*integrum*] and ‘true’ [*verum*] way of God, but it would profit nothing unless they come to the grace of Christ.⁹⁹

It is from this point of view that Augustine deals with the Hermetica in Book VIII and Book XVIII of his most influential work, the *City of God*. Just as, in his youth, Cicero’s *Hortensius* made an enormous impression and later returns in critical assessment,¹⁰⁰ so here returns the Hermetic *Asclepius*. Page after page in Book VIII one finds Augustine’s quotes from this writing, and after a couple of years we hear an echo of this in Book XVIII. He will have had a copy of the work close at hand, for his quotes are so direct that, on the basis of these quotes, scholars have been able to correct some *Asclepius* manuscripts.

⁹³ *Conf.* 4, 24: ‘et illam monadem appellabam tamquam sine ullo sexu mentem...’; *CH IV*, 10: ‘[theos] he gar Monás...’, the root of all being.

⁹⁴ *Conf.* 4, 22.

⁹⁵ *Asclepius* 6: ‘... magnum miraculum est homo...’.

⁹⁶ Berlin 1930, 128-134. The book is a revised edition of his ‘Habilitationsschrift’ (Kiel 1927), while part III ‘ist frisch hinzugekommen’ (‘Vorwort’, VII). As a matter of fact, Theiler was not the first scholar who saw the parallels, but had a (much more cautious) precursor in Max Zepf: see M. Zepf, *Augustins Confessiones*, Tübingen 1926, 64 n. 4.

⁹⁷ See e.g. A.-J. Festugiere, *La Révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste*, IV, Paris 1954, esp. 92 ff.: ‘La doctrine platonicienne de la transcendence divine au II^e siècle.’

⁹⁸ Theiler, 128, who also opines that there are parallels with the *Asclepius*.

⁹⁹ *De bapt.* VI, 44, 87.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. e.g. Hagendahl, *o.c.* (n. 17), I, 79-94.

As regards the contents of these citations (one of them, from *Asclepius* 37, recurs 12 times!): they function as some sort of ‘psychoanalysis’ of idolatry. In Book VIII, Augustine discusses the so-called ‘natural theology’, *i.e.*, the theory which considers deities to be the personification of natural forces. In this case, the debate is with the Platonists in particular. They consider demons to be the mediators between gods and men, and hold that these mediators should be venerated. Augustine denies this, and continues his exposition by speaking on Hermes Trismegistus. For, according to Hermes, man himself was able to create gods; this activity, however, that (famous: *ille!*) Hermes condemned and he admitted that the pagan gods are deified humans. Moreover, he miraculously foretold the end of Egyptian idol worship, a prophecy which has been fulfilled, for presently the Egyptians are Christians.

One perceives a certain ambivalence in Augustine’s elaborate discussion. He considers Hermes to be a liar who—unlike the true Biblical prophets—is not inspired by the Holy Spirit,¹⁰¹ but by a fallacious spirit (*spiritus fallax*).¹⁰² How is it possible that one truthfully tells of ancestral idolatry—now follows the saying which Augustine quotes 12 times to rebut his opponents—:

‘Because, therefore, our forefathers erred very far with respect to the knowledge of the gods, through their being incredulous [*increduli*] and through their want of attention to divine worship and service, they invented the art of making gods’

and, moreover, predicts the downfall of the cult of the gods, but at the same time laments this downfall? Did not Hermes, on the one hand, driven by a truly divine force, come to his revelation of the serious error of his forefathers? Was he however, on the other hand, not driven by a diabolic force when he did lament the downfall of this error?¹⁰³

One cannot say that the later Augustine is favourable to Hermes in the same way as was the case with Lactantius, for instance. His negative estimation of Hermes is also in sharp contrast with his remarkably positive appreciation of the Sibyls.¹⁰⁴ Notwithstanding this ultimately negative judgement of Hermes, there still is no full rejection, however. One understands that later generations, through a direct reading of the Hermetica and, for instance, via their reading of Lactantius, sometimes judged otherwise.¹⁰⁵ All this did not completely run counter to Augustine’s opinion, for although in Book VIII of his *City of God* the older Catholic bishop is speaking, who is not a Manichaean anymore, but got knowledge of a better revelation which he is now defending against his pagan opponents, one nevertheless reads in regard to Hermes:

‘He makes many statements agreeable to the truth concerning the one true God who fabricated [*fabricator*] this world’.¹⁰⁶

As far as I can see, it is this two-fold appreciation which will prevail for many centuries after Augustine.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ DCD VIII, 23. 98.

¹⁰² DCD VIII, 26.

¹⁰³ DCD VIII, 24.

¹⁰⁴ See esp. DCD XVIII, 23. For more on this striking appreciation: van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon* (n. 38), 98-99, esp. the long n. 442.

¹⁰⁵ Such as, for instance, Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples, a precursor of the young humanist and later reformer Calvin. Cf. e.g. D.P. Walker, ‘The *prisca theologia* in France’, *JWCI* 17 (1954) 204-259.

¹⁰⁶ DCD VIII, 23: ‘Multa quippe talia dicit de uno vero Deo fabricatore mundi, qualia veritas habet.’ Cf. VIII, 24.

¹⁰⁷ A first investigation is offered by Peter Dronke in his inaugural lecture: P. Dronke, *Hermes and the Sibyls. Continuations and Creations*, Cambridge 1990.

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