A PROTREPTIC TO A LIMINAL MANICHAEAN AT
THE CENTRE OF AUGUSTINE’S CONFESSIONS 4

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1. Introduction

In the middle of the fourth book of Augustine’s Confessions (4.14–19) there occurs a passage of heightened emotional intensity. What I investigate here is the type of audience that may be the target of such a passage. In some respects the current article is a continuation of the deliberations expressed in a recent article (Kotzé 2013, forthcoming) on the kind of audience that may be targeted by the narrative in books 1 to 3 of the Confessions, this time focussing on the narrative in book 4 and coming to a conclusion quite different from that in the previous article: while books 1 to 3 frequently seem to target Catholic insiders as well as a broad late ancient audience, book 4 to my mind constitutes above all a powerful protreptic to potential Manichaean readers. In order to construct the argument concerning this claim I recapitulate a few points from the earlier article concerning the type of Manichaean reader I think may actually be envisaged as a potential reader of the Confessions (section 2 below). In the next sections of the article I then discuss the structure of book 4 and argue that paragraphs 4.14–19 may be regarded as a passage of central importance within the book (section 3). This forms the basis for the arguments in the following subsection (section 4) that the core of book 4 contains a powerful protreptic aimed at a liminal Manichaean reader.

2. The ‘Liminal Manichaean’

In much of my past research I emphasized the importance of considering Manichaean readers as a significant part of the potential readership of the Confessions. In the case of book 4 this is an issue that is often overlooked by commentators. Whereas many of the interpretations of this book published since the 1980’s seem to disregard the extent to which book 4 is a book about Manichaeism, also those who fully recognize this do not consider the extent
to which the book does not only speak about Manichaeism, but speaks to Manichaeeans. In my view book 4 constitutes a strong intellectual and emotional appeal to the potential Manichaean reader to see the problematic nature and the futility of Manichaean ways of thinking. The passage at the centre of the book is as powerful a protreptic to a Manichaean reader as I have argued that the Meditation on Psalm 4 in book 9 is (Kotzé 2001). Before I go on to discuss the structure of book 4 as a background to my arguments about its intended audience(s) and communicative aim(s) it is necessary to concisely reiterate what kind of reader I envisage when I speak of a potential Manichaean reader.

My arguments about the potential Manichaean readership of the Confessions have evolved over the years in an effort to answer to valid criticism contending that no committed Manichaean would stomach the abuse against Manichaeeism in book 3 and (less explicitly but equally potently) in the rest of the Confessions and then meekly continue to read to the end of the work. In a recent article (Kotzé 2013, forthcoming) I argued for the use of the term ‘liminal Manichaean’ as shorthand to refer to the kind of potential Manichaean reader I envisage as the target of many of the intellectual and emotional appeals in the Confessions.

The most important category of Manichaean reader that I argued one should consider is one already interested in Catholic Christianity as an alternative for Manichaean Christianity, someone, like one of the friends earlier converted to Manichaeeism by Augustine or like Augustine himself some 15 years earlier. This would be a person who—because of growing intellectual objections or the increasing clamp down on Manichaeeans1—seriously considers conversion to Catholic Christianity, or who has, in fact recently converted to Catholicism.

The type of Manichaean reader who is already interested in Catholicism, on the point of converting or very recently converted is what I indicate with the term ‘liminal Manichaean,’ also in the current article. Here it is my contention that the strong appeals embodied in book 4 of the Confessions are eminently well designed to reach out to just such a liminal Manichaean reader.

The concept of the liminal Manichaean is also inextricably intertwined with my arguments about and definition of protreptic, which argues that the purposes of conversion and confirmation of faith and the audience locations of outsiders and insiders cannot be meaningfully separated (Kotzé 2011).

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1 See the incisive interpretation of the historical evidence by BeDuhn 2010: 136–144; 196.