Book Reviews


The fourth century Christian bishop Augustine of Hippo was an adherent of the Manichaean religion for roughly a decade before his conversion to Christianity. He continued to respond to Manichaean claims after he had left the movement, developing insights into the nature of evil that profoundly influenced the later Western theological tradition. The present book (the first in a projected three-volume series) takes the discussion of Augustine’s relation to Manichaeism to a new level and is an impressive piece of scholarship.

By closely analyzing Augustine’s experience of Manichaeism, BeDuhn aims to shed light on the questions of how religious identities were constructed in late antiquity and how different (and changing) configurations of power within late antique society shaped the construction of religious identity. Augustine’s formative early years coincided with a period of pluralism in late antique Roman society, in which religious communities lacked coercive power because the state and broader social institutions did not consistently and unequivocally endorse a single pattern of religious commitment. Religious commitments could therefore be contracted at the individual level by voluntary adherence to a community and participation in the community’s ritual practices. Self-identification with a community could nonetheless be accompanied by a selective, idiosyncratic appropriation of the community’s beliefs, the retention of certain independent, skeptical attitudes, and an ongoing commitment to other projects which had little or no connection with religion.

BeDuhn argues that Augustine’s connection with Manichaeism can be explained along similar lines. He suggests that Augustine’s initial attraction to Manichaeism had little to do with Manichaean beliefs *per se*. Instead, the Manichaean claim to invite open enquiry and require nothing of anyone that could not be proven by reason appeared to be congruent with Augustine’s pre-existing search for a “philosophical” life (an open-minded seeking of truth). Augustine also seems to have thought that this philosophical style of life would lead to a more comprehensive, holistic knowledge of the natural world and this predisposed him to be sympathetic toward religious systems that claimed to possess such knowledge.
In provisionally accepting a Manichaean identity Augustine encountered a new paradigm that remained with him even after he had formally discarded that Manichaean identity. Through Manichaeism, Augustine was introduced to the idea of a religious community that held regular meetings consisting of instruction and ritual performance and used a discourse of self that invited self-regulation through the practice of confession. This paradigm intrigued Augustine because it provided a concrete, practical framework within which he could pursue the cultivation of character necessary to arrive at truth and wisdom. Manichaean practices thus initially seemed to be a practical means to arrive at the broader goal of a philosophical life.

As a minority religious community of recent origin, North African Manichaeism had little coercive power and its members had a remarkable degree of liberty and selectivity in appropriating and interpreting the religious beliefs of the sect. For those members of the movement who were primarily interested in the community’s existing network of social relationships and the shaping of persons and relationships through ritual practice, the diversity of religious belief was not perceived as a problem. The situation was different for adherents who were heavily involved in intellectual projects within the larger society. Individuals such as Augustine were profoundly shaped by ideals, norms and expectations connected with the literary, scientific and philosophical interests of the contemporary elite culture. These commitments posed a potential obstacle to the formation of a comprehensive Manichaean self. Augustine discovered that Manichaeans had little interest in empirical questions regarding the natural world and refused to demythologize their sectarian mythology so as to arrive at a higher, more universal wisdom. This lack of congruence with the beliefs and expectations of Roman elite culture (which Augustine endorsed) created a dissonance and disillusionment that made it reasonable for Augustine to limit his self-identification with beliefs and ideals peculiar to Manichaeism.

Augustine thus became disaffected with Manichaeism because he judged that it had failed in its role as a subordinate, instrumental means to arrive at the holistic wisdom and self-mastery that he associated with the philosophical life. Disillusionment and disengagement from Manichaean beliefs did not, however, immediately lead to disaffiliation from the Manichaean community. Augustine’s break with the latter occurred only later, under the pressure of increasing legal proscription of Manichaeism, which made nominal adherence increasingly untenable as the conditions of power in the broader society changed.

Augustine’s disaffiliation from Manichaeism was followed by a discovery of the possible congruence of his continuing quest for a philosophical life with the Christian Platonism and ascetic practice being discussed by certain members of the new Christian elite of Milan. This discovery created new possibilities for religious identity, which had the potential to succeed precisely in those areas where Augustine judged Manichaeism to have failed. His new affiliation with