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Augustine's Manichaeian Dilemma. Volume 2, Making a "Catholic" Self

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Jason David BeDuhn, *Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma, 2: Making a "Catholic" Self, 388-401 C.E.* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. x + 538; \$79.95.

Recent discoveries of key texts have stirred a small but vibrant scholarly business of reconstructing the lost Atlantis of ancient Manichaeism's religious discipline and worldview. It has also compelled reassessing the Manichaean legacy of its most famous convert and defector, Augustine of Hippo. Jason David BeDuhn, a leader in Manichaean studies for more than a decade, is producing an ambitiously conceived and engagingly written trilogy with the series title *Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma*. This second volume audaciously rereads the early Augustine against himself, not only to disambiguate Manichaeism from the North African's pettifoggery, but also to present a subversive interpretation of Augustine as a novice Nicene Christian. With its predecessor this volume sets the current standard for the study of Augustine in relation to Manichaeism. In my judgment, the book's acute angle of vision brilliantly uncovers Augustine's Manichaean cast of mind even after becoming Catholic; but the same intensity of focus also flirts with reductionism and loses some perspective on the historical Augustine.

B. proceeds through Augustine's datable works in the period 388-401 with one eye trained on the most elaborate of his anti-Manichaean works, *Confessions*. For B. (following P. Fredriksen), the debate of 392 with the Manichaean Fortunatus of Hippo (a hero of B.'s) was a decisive catalyzing "trauma" (173). Put on the defensive by Fortunatus's biblical expertise, Augustine soon "plundered" (406) not only the Manichaean's biblicism but also his teaching about "the grace-bestowed birth of the will" (293). According to B., facing Fortunatus and not reading Paul caused Augustine's famous theological shift toward operative grace in the *Answer*

to *Simplicianus* of 396. Accordingly, many elements of “Augustinianism” were actually Manichaean teachings reconstituted by the new frame of Nicene orthodoxy (415).

Meanwhile Augustine continually reinvented himself by adopting the positions and poses of the Catholic “self,” often with little initial understanding of their meaning. His conversion was established especially by the “performance” (a favorite word) of *Confessions*, whereby Augustine “became the person whose story he told” (272). Its origins lay in the adaptation of his experience of the Manichaean initiation rite of confession, according to B. Augustine composed a self-defense against accusations of Bishop Megalius who had blocked his ascent to the episcopate. The winning performance led not only to Megalius retracting his charges, but also to Augustine using it to draft a portion of his landmark *Confessions*.

The book bestows many benefits on the diligent reader. It immerses us in the ancient debates by clearly laying out the issues between two great but incompatible worldviews. With laser-like precision it analyzes Augustine’s increments of development, or in B.’s perspective, his serial self-presentations. It conducts a tutorial on Manichaean views of evil, dualist metaphysics, the nature of the soul, and the workings of the human will, without the usual refraction through a Nicene-Augustinian lens. Indeed it brings the integral cogency and beauty of Manichaean views to light against the common pro-Augustinian descriptions of his bizarre and embarrassing religious misstep. Methodologically self-aware and transparent, this book’s brash revisionism disallows facile readings of Augustine that leave him mounted in the stained glass of triumphalist church history. B. instead perceptively reads Augustine within his deep cultural, historical, and religious enmeshments, and treats his polemics seriously as part of the intense ideological battle that they were. We are forced to see an Augustine not often noted, petty, venomous, and trivializing, a spin doctor (of the Church) extraordinaire who drives his engine of

invective at full throttle. Studies that ignore (read: excuse) that dirty business not only fail to offer a full picture but even distort our understanding of the man of Hippo.

On the other hand, how well does the book work as an interpretation of Augustine? In my judgment, it offers a brilliant, erudite, well researched, engagingly feisty, and skillfully drawn...caricature. Like all good caricatures its emphasizes things recognizably true, like Jimmy Durante's outsized nose. But it does so at a price. To shift the image, it looks at Augustine through a convex lens that makes huge everything at the focal center while pushing other aspects, even major ones, to the margins. As an interpretation of Augustine therefore the book seems to lack not truth, but perspective. For instance, it convincingly demonstrates Manichaeism's enduring influence on the written works of the early Catholic Augustine; but by the time it closely rereads *Confessions* in last two chapters, it has detected Manichaeism behind so many bushes in the Augustinian garden that it seems schematic. On a wider theological canvas (for this book dives deep into theology), B. commends the strength of the Manichaean dualistic cosmology for its success in escaping the antinomies of Augustine's "monistic" views of God and the soul. The analysis of what Manichaeans argued *against* is instructive as far as it goes, but in my opinion obstructs the full view of what Augustine effectively contended *for* (and thus was converted *to*), which is the essentially Jewish outlook of Nicene Christianity. B. seems to avoid the anti-Jewish elephant in the Manichaean room. Augustine's former mentor and later nemesis, Faustus of Milevis, had no such reservations, as he makes clear in his *Capitula*. His prime complaint against Catholic Christianity was that it was a form of crypto-Judaism, and accordingly he slurs Catholics as "semi-Jews" (*Against Faustus* 33.3), having a dalliance with the odious Jewish god Adonai and pretending to honor his Torah (15.1). Furthermore, he robustly acclaims Manichaeans as "enemies of the Jews" (22.4) who openly "destroy" Torah

(6.1), while maligning Jews for stealing the beautiful axioms of natural morality and covering them with the “scabs and stains” of their rituals (22.2). Neither volume in the series so far treats Manichaeism’s virulent anti-Judaism in detail, a puzzling omission after the appearance of Paula Fredriksen’s *Augustine and the Jews* (2008).

Likewise this interpretation of Augustine’s engagement with Manichaeism in the period 388-401 ignores Augustine’s increasing, and textually traceable, emphasis on flesh and history as bearers of grace. This includes his sharpened focus on the scriptural story of salvation stretching from Israel’s beginnings through the appearance of the human Christ, God-Man and Mediator. This led to important correlative developments in his views on history, church, signs and sacraments, and Scripture. Nor was this unconnected to his anti-Manichaeism; rather it occurred in direct response to Manichaean dualisms (and so supporting B.’s argument about ongoing Manichaean influence on Augustine). All this was grounded in the Jewish identity of Christianity that Augustine accepted and explored in this period.

Furthermore, the book’s narrative about Augustine’s developments on grace seems not entirely coherent. His earlier “synergistic” view, B. explains, that allowed space for the human will under grace undergoes an “earthquake” in 396 whereby the unilateral grace of God’s congruent call “completely reshapes Augustine’s position on God and humanity in a way that would color his system for the rest of his life” (290). Nevertheless, a wide swath of *Confessions* later embeds the supposedly outdated “synergistic” view of grace. B. tries different explanations for this. Augustine’s working draft so structured the synergistic view that it couldn’t be taken out (262). A footnote turns the supposed seismic shift of 396 into a mere “momentary insight” that Augustine cannot be depended upon to apply consistently “where other considerations and tropes may prevail” (473n45). That is, Augustine “continued to use rhetoric more aligned with his

earlier views on habit and will” (ibid.). In other words, it conveniently fits B.’s portrait of the shape-shifting Augustine who “appears to have been able rhetorically to shed one self and adopt another with relative ease” (413). This explanation does not satisfy. It does, however, illustrate the book’s habit of ascribing Augustine’s changes of tone and substance to his constant “rhetorical bobbing and weaving” (419). Even allowing for Augustine’s irritating (and often dull) excesses on this score, one finds in the book a curiously unsophisticated, dismissive view of ancient rhetoric, viewing it essentially as a tool for manipulation (e.g., he could not fail to dupe hearers because he was, “after all, a master rhetorician”; 256). This contrasts with scholarship’s recent work of recovering rhetoric as a staple component of all human discourse and a critical element of hermeneutics.

This low view of rhetoric is surprising in a book that offers its own quite self-consciously rhetorical (in the good sense) “performance.” I found great insight and freshness in its contrarian angle of vision, but eventually got distracted by its persistent editorializing. Augustine ridicules (80), slanders (83), and smears (105) his opponents as he descends into histrionics (83) and hypocrisy (156). His arguments are fatuous and illogical (115), vague and evasive (240), tenuous and far-fetched (173), arbitrary (121) and patently absurd (226). Assuming and dropping positions at will, depending on circumstances (156), Augustine makes himself likeable for his own ends (91), or plants tongue firmly in cheek (112), or shows a perfect poker-face (161), or plays the illusionist (414). When these tricks don’t work he is embarrassed (263), miscalculates terribly (129), and feels himself in trouble (134) and under pressure (230), so that his performances become unengaged and lackluster (205). In straits he blinks at problems (185), colludes with debate organizers (129), and willingly risks being caught in misrepresentations and nonsequiturs (156) that suggest the wiles of a liar (255); and so on. After a while all this becomes

weariness, like listening to two people argue in another room. Indeed the book can seem modeled on the brief of very smart and assiduous divorce attorney who is prosecuting a lawsuit on behalf of a first wife whose husband not only deserted her but also used her inheritance to make himself famous. Augustine and the Manichaeans certainly had a messy public divorce, and B. ensures that no offense goes unnoticed, no claim unchallenged, no weakness unexploited, and every missing carpet nail is noted. But combativeness sometimes pushes the book toward the tone of one of Augustine's anti-Manichaean tracts that B. calls "a tedious and joyless exercise in petty sniping" (308).

Is this still history? B.'s superb credentials as a research historian turn this question into a puzzle, until one discovers the eccentric, even dualistic, view of the historian's task spelled out in B.'s earliest book: "Historians can choose to adopt the orientation of a given source, and therefore continue its polemic or apologetic significance. Conversely, historians may reject the tendency of the source and engage in a polemic against it, in this way renegotiating the power relationships of the material" (*The Manichaean Body* [2000], 8). Perhaps. But what becomes of the more traditional historian's concern to attain the golden mean of a judicious perspective that can read a historical figure "without his futures" (from the current book, 7, quoting J. O'Donnell)?

Other claims might be debated (e.g., that figurative interpretation merely "smoothed over" tensions in Scripture (178), or that one who said so much about divine love really believed "deity is defined by power" (64), or that virtue is "whatever the most powerful being dictated" (412)). But debates are to be expected in reading the best scholarly books, especially ones about high profile figures and high stakes issues with long-contested histories. Despite my criticisms, the fact is that I enjoyed this book immensely. I think that it (with its predecessor) is a must-read;

and that it is essential for historians of late antiquity and readers of Augustine, especially theologians, to pass through its school. Readers can look forward to well-crafted, crisply written sentences that make the education a pleasure. The book's great achievement is to see Augustine more clearly in his own historical and theological context. This is a book to wrestle with, to learn from, and to be grateful for. The late J. Kevin Coyle, to whom B. dedicates his book, wrote truly, "to know Augustine, one must know Manichaeism." It is also true that one cannot thoroughly know Augustine's Manichaeism without B.'s work.

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