

GILLES QUISPÉL

MANI
THE APOSTLE OF JESUS CHRIST

After the last world war Augustinian studies have been renewed completely owing to the exertions of Prof. Pierre Courcelle¹. Up to that date the relation of Augustine to Neoplatonism had not been clear: was he converted to Neoplatonism or to Christianity, was the impact of the Bible and of doctrine limited to the later period of his life? Now it was shown that Augustine came into contact with a circle of Christian Platonists or Platonic Christians in Milan, of which Ambrose was the outstanding figure.

The position of Courcelle has been criticized, not always fairly. Some doubted whether the sermons of the learned bishop, which figure among the preserved works of Ambrose and which do contain the stock themes so dear to Augustine (spiritual being of God, soul as *imago dei*, evil as *privatio boni*), can be dated with such precision as to fit exactly into the period in which Augustine was among the audience of Ambrose². But even if this criticism would be justified, it remains an established fact that the Christian faith, as preached by Ambrose in Milan, had a Platonic flavour and must have come to Augustine as a great surprise. Others expressed doubts about the methods used by Courcelle and their limitations, because the latter applied source criticism to the problem he studied and quoted many parallels³. The reactionary and peevish tone in which these doubts were expressed, was unfortunate indeed; but it led to a discussion⁴ in which Courcelle somewhat modified his view. The well-known passage in the Confessions (VII, 16), in which Augustine tells us how he ascends to God and is repelled, was no longer considered to be "une extase manquée" after the pattern of Plotinus, but, in the perspective of similar descriptions in Philo, Synesius and... Valentinus, held to be a typically Christian view of an encounter of sinful man with a holy God⁵.

This then would mean that Augustine had an experience of God, which is characteristic of a theistic religion and that he interpreted Neoplatonism, which was a dynamic pantheism, in this light. Which means that he never understood this philosophy correctly, but always saw it through the spectacles of Ambrose.

I think that in this form the problem of Augustine and Neoplatonism has been solved. Recently a new development has taken place, which is bound to have a great impact

1. P. COURCELLE, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin*, sec. ed., Paris, 1968.

2. W. THEILER, *Gnomon*, 25, 1953, pp. 113-122.

3. A. MANDOUZE, in *Augustinus Magister*, I, 1954, pp. 67-84.

4. Discussion at the International Augustinian Congress, September 1954, between G. Quispel and P. Courcelle

(not contained in *Augustinus Magister*, III), in which the former mentioned some passages in Philo, Synesius and Valentinus as parallels of Augustine's experience. Cf. EMILY BRONTË: "Oh, dreadful is the shock, intense the agony", etc.

5. P. COURCELLE, *Les Confessions de saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire*, Paris, 1963, pp. 43-58.

on the study of Augustine and perhaps will inaugurate a new era. For there still remains the problem, to what extent Augustine knew and was influenced by Manicheism. Ever since the time of Isaac de Beausobre it has been doubted whether Augustine, who was never more than a simple *auditor*, was really familiar with the tenets of the religion to which he adhered for so many years. Moreover it was suggested that North African Manicheism deviated completely from the original, primitive form of the myth as expressed by Mani, because as missionaries in a Christian country they adapted their teachings to the beliefs of their surroundings⁶. The underlying idea of all these theories is that Mani taught an Iranian dualism which in its essence had nothing to do with Christianity.

It must be admitted that Augustine tells us very little about the fascinating life of Mani. This is the more striking because, as we shall see, at that time a sort of Life of Mani in Greek did exist. Was Augustine ignorant of the details of the biography of the Babylonian founder of this world religion, or did he not care about them? We probably never shall know.

The discovery, however, of Manichean Coptic writings at Medinet Maedi in 1931 had cast a shadow of doubt upon the view that Manicheism was a purely Iranian sect and had preserved the pre-Christian Iranian myth of the Saved Saviour. These documents, especially the Psalms, showed the overwhelming impact of Christ upon the mind of the Manichee. So Henri-Charles Puech, in a learned and very scholarly monography, described Mani as a Gnostic and the heir of second century, Western Gnosticism, who owed not a little to Christianity⁷. Going in his steps, F. Decret, in a very fine and detailed study, argued that Augustine and his North African Manichean opponents were much nearer to the source than they were supposed to be⁸. There was, however, no definitive proof that this Christian interpretation of Manicheism, as found in the Coptic papyri, in Augustine's African opponents and in Augustine himself, went back to the founder of the whole movement. And in the last monograph on Mani, which is not as good as it ought to be, it is simply stated, without any proof or discussion, that Geo Widengren has shown Mani's presuppositions to be Iranian and not Christian⁹. This view has been refuted recently.

The University of Cologne has acquired a Greek codex of the fourth century, probably discovered at Oxyrrhynchus, about the life of Mani and the early history of his church, a sort of Luke-Acts of Manicheism¹⁰. In this papyrus it is stated that Mani from his fourth till his twenty-fifth year was a member of the Jewish Christian sect of the Elkesaites in Southern Babylonia. So Mani once was a Jewish boy, circumcised and educated in the Law, before he was summoned by his Twin to preach his new revelation. Probably his parents too were Jewish. The edifying story, according to which Mani's father, Patek, and his mother, Mary, were of princely, Parthian origin, now I think turns out to be pious Manichean fancy. As often as not in the course of history, royal origin has been attributed to the founder of a new religion.

We must see this new discovery in its right perspective. According to the tradition of the church, Edessa, the centre of Semitic Christianity, owed its special shade of the faith to a Jewish missionary from Palestine called Addai. Now, of course, tradition is always wrong and historical criticism is always right. But it would seem that nevertheless Aramaic Christianity has a Palestinian background. This was shown among others by

6. L. H. GRONDIJS, *Analyse du Manichéisme numidien*, in *Augustinus Magister*, III, 1955, pp. 391-410.

7. H.-CH. PUECH, *Le Manichéisme*, Paris, 1949.

8. F. DECRET, *Aspects du Manichéisme dans l'Afrique romaine*, Paris, 1970.

9. L.J.R. ORT, *Mani. A religio-historical description of his personality*, Leiden 1967.

10. A. HENRICH AND L. KOENEN, Ein griechischer Mani-Codex, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 5, 1970, pp. 97-214.