Reminiscenses of Manichaeism in Augustine’s City of God

This article aims to analyse all the passages in Augustine’s City of God in which he either explicitly or implicitly makes mention of Manichaeism and its doctrines. It turns out that, even in his later years, Manichaean doctrines were at the forefront of Augustine’s mind, although essential elements of his own doctrines (for instance, evil being the privation of good) have a clearly anti-Manichæan background. A close reading of all those anti-Manichæan passages further discloses some fairly unique particulars, such as, for example, the Manichæans’ use and interpretation of John 8:44 and 1 John 3:8.

Introduction

This article investigates where and how Augustine deals with Manichaeism in his City of God. In this context, the question of whether the gnostic prophet Mani and his doctrines had any influence on the central theme of De civitate Dei, for example, the antithesis of the two civitates or ‘cities’ is only indirectly touched upon. Although I have attempted to address this difficult and complicated subject elsewhere (Van Oort 1991:199–234), the focus here falls on the first question.

At first glance, the question of ‘where and how’ seems susceptible to a brief and straightforward answer. In his substantial work, De civitate Dei, characterised by the author as ‘a great and difficult work’, Augustine explicitly mentions Manichaeism in only a few instances, namely in Books I, VI, XI (twice) and XIV, and the name of Mani does not even occur. This seems rather surprising in light of the fact that Augustine was a hearer among the Manicheans for some 10 years and then, after his return to the Catholic Christian Church, expressly wrote against his former coreligionists for more than 20 years. However, during the period that Augustine dictated the 22 books of De civitate Dei, viz. from 412 until 426–427, polemics against Manichaeism was not at the centre of his writings. It was only in the later stages of the Pelagian controversy, and particularly during its culmination in the struggle with Julian of Eclanum near the end of his life, that Augustine was forced to discuss his position on Manichaeism again.

Despite these circumstances, a close reading of several passages in the grand work De civitate Dei appears to be worth our while. Such a close reading even provides some new and unique insights of Augustine’s knowledge of Manichaeism. In the next paragraphs I will analyse the relevant passages in the order that they appear in Augustine’s grand opus. After that I will draw some conclusions.

‘You shall not kill’ and the Manichaean ‘Seal of the Hands’

The first relevant passage is in De civitate Dei (DCD) I, 20 and runs:“Num iigitur ob hoc, cum audimes: Non occides, surgulatum uelle nefas ducimus et Manichaeorum errori insanissime adquiescimus? His iigitur deliramentis remotus cum legimus: Non occides, si propterea non accipimus hoc dictum..."
Augustine here touches upon the so-called Manichaean signaculum manuum, ‘the seal of the hands’. For instance in chapter 80 of the Coptic Manichaean Kephalaia,10 we find the main precepts held by both the Elect and the catechumens. The first ‘righteousness’ of the elect is described as having three parts, to refrain from all sexual activity; to take care not to harm the Light-soul trapped everywhere in matter and in vegetation in particular; and not to consume meat or alcoholic drinks. This corresponds to the three seals of mouth, hands and breast (signaculis oris, manuum et sinis) discussed in detail by Augustine in The Morals of the Manichaeans.11 In regard to the second seal, he states that the Manichaeans opine that human beings have ‘a juridical society’ with beasts and plants (… can beluis et Arboribus societatem iuris esse, 54);12 that they witness that trees have a rational soul (Animae manquae illa quam rationalem inesse arborum arbitramini, 55);13 that they say that the killing of a tree or of animals is murder (si arborem necare, ut usus dicitis, homicidium est, ut necare animalia, 54);14 and that they term this killing as being nefas, a crime (… nefas putatis …, 60; Nefas esse dicitis, 61; … nefas wisis uideatur …, 63).15

In the just quoted passage of DCD I,20, all these Manichaean doctrinal tenets concerning the seal of the hands turn out to be added with great subtlety.16 Perhaps one may also find here an allusion to the Manichaean view on the arrangement of the animal world in animals that fly, swim, walk or creep. In any case, in De moribus Manichaeorum17 and also elsewhere,18 Augustine can detail the Manichaean classification into serpents, swimming creatures, flying creatures and those that have legs (the quadrupeds and the bipeds).19 In addition, the fact that in the passage under discussion he uses the adverb insanissime and the noun deliramentum in connection with the Manichaeans and their doctrines is not surprising. Augustine makes deliberate use of these and similar disparaging terms

When we hear ‘You shall not kill’, then, do we for this reason consider it a crime to pull up a bush and, losing all sanity, subscribe to the error of the Manichaeans? Because we reject such ravings, when we read ‘You shall not kill’, we take it not to refer to shrubs, which have no feelings, nor to irrational living beings which fly, swim, walk, or crawl, since they do not share with us any capacity for reason, which was not given to them. Hence, it is by a just arrangement of the Creator that their life and death is subordinated to our needs. If this is so, it remains that we take the command as applying to human beings. ‘You shall not kill’: that is, neither other persons or yourself. For he who kills himself kills nothing other than a human being.

Near the beginning of his voluminous writing, the first part of which has a strong apologetic character, Augustine sets out his view that Christians have no authority to commit suicide under any circumstance.8 Nowhere in ‘the sacred canonical books’ is there any injunction or permission to kill oneself. The command ‘You shall not kill’ [Ex 20:13] is clear in this respect: the text has no addition (as in the case of ‘You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour’) and therefore it must be concluded that there is no exception, ‘not even in favour of him to whom the command is addressed’.

Yet, because the command ‘You shall not kill’ has no limitation, ‘some people (quidam) attempt to extend its scope to wild and domestic animals (in bestias ac pecora) to make it mean that even these may never be killed’. At first, Augustine does not explicitly say who the quidam are that he is referring to.9 In one and the same breath, however, he sets out their opinion: ‘But then, why not apply it to plants (herbas) and to anything rooted in the earth and nourished by the soil (quidquid humano radicuit alitum ac figitur)’?

For although this class of creation is without feeling, it is called ‘living’, and hence is capable of dying and consequently of being killed, when violence is done to it. And so the Apostle, speaking of seeds of this kind, says, ‘What you sow does not come to life unless it dies’, [1 Cor 15:36]; and in a Psalm it is written, ‘He killed their vines with hail’. [Ps. 77, 78:47]

Next to this comes the just quoted passage.

8.Cf. the Breviarius: ‘Nullam esse auiectantium, quae Christiani in qualibet caussa ius uoluntariae necis tribuat’. Here and further on in this article we refer to this Breviarius, which has its own value and was, in all probability, composed by Augustine. himself; cf. Van Oort (1991:63 n. 75).
9.The designation quidam here has a contemptuous tone and is used in order to express disregard and (feigned) ignorance. Cf. e.g. Conf. V,3,3 (‘quidam Manichaeorum episcopum, Faustus nomine’); Centra Faustum L1 (‘Faustus quidam fuit gente Afer’); De haeresibus 46,1 (‘Manichei a quidam Persa exstirpatum qui uocabantur Manes’). Other examples include, for instance, Conf. III,4,7: ‘cuiusdam Ciceronis’.
15.CSEL 90, 142, 143, 145; e.g. De mor. Man. 53 and C. Faust. XX,20.
16.Also in his work against Faustus’ Capitula (esp. VI,4; CSEL 25, 289–299) A. provides important details on the signaculum manuum; cf. e.g. VI,4 (CSEL 25, 422) for the Manichaean doctrine that earth, wood and stones have sense (senitus), and VI,8 (297) XVI,28 (473) and XX,16 (556) for their speaking of homicidium. For A.’s acquaintance with these Manichaean doctrines, see e.g. De haer. 46, 32; here [CCL 46, 317] it runs, for instance: ‘Herbas enim atque arborae sic putant uiuere ut uitam qua illis inest et sentire credant et dolere cum laeditur, nec aliquid sine se cruciatu eorum quern quosque posse uelere os capere. (…) Vide agriculturae, quae omnium artium est innocenzissima, tanquam plurium homicidiorum ream dementem accusant. (…) In eis ipsi uelent nihil in agro operantes, (…) uenientes de tot ac tantis secundum suam uxanatem homicidii alienis: For they suppose that plants and trees are alive. They believe that the life which is in them has sensations and feels pain when injured, and therefore that no one can pull or pluck anything without crucifying them. (…) Hence, in their madness they make their brethren to refer to shrubs, which have no feelings, nor to irrational living beings which fly, swim, walk, or crawl, since they do not share with us any capacity for reason, which was not given to them. Hence, it is by a just arrangement of the Creator that their life and death is subordinated to our needs. If this is so, it remains that we take the command as applying to human beings. ‘You shall not kill’: that is, neither other persons or yourself. For he who kills himself kills nothing other than a human being.
not only in obvious anti-Manichaean works such as De moribus Manichaeorum et Contra Faustum, but also in, for instance, his Confessions. For Augustine, like for so many other Catholic church fathers,20 deliramentum is a well-known wordplay on the name of Mani, which in Greek reads Μανίς and thus resembles the word for a madman (μανικός).21 Likewise, terms such as insanii (the madman), insanias (madness) and the verb insinare (to be mad, rage) are repeatedly used to denounce the Manichaecans.22

On the unity of the Jewish and Christian ‘sacraments’

The second passage in which Augustine makes explicit reference to the Manichaecans is in Book VI, 11. It runs as follows:

Sed de sacramentis Judaorum, ut et cur utenquas instituta sint auctoritate divina, ac post modum a populo Dei, cui uita aeternae mysterium reuelatum est, tempore quo auctoritatem adhaeræ sublatæ sint, et alia dixinis, maxime cum adversus Manichaos aegreus, et in hoc opere loco opportuniores diciendum est. (DCCD Book VI, 11)

But as to why, and to what extent, the Jewish religious practices were established by divine authority and later, at the proper time, and by that same authority, were taken over by the people of God, to whom the mystery of eternal life has been revealed – these are questions that I have discussed elsewhere, especially when arguing against the Manichaecans. In this work, I shall have to discuss them at a more appropriate point.23 (Babcock 2012:204–205)

After having discussed Seneca’s opinion of the Jews, Augustine informs the reader that he has treated the questions that arise about the Jewish religious practices or rites (sacramenta) elsewhere, ‘in particular in my books against the Manichaecans’. Although in several of his anti-Manichaean works Augustine touches upon the said questions (for instance in his disputations with Fortunatus and Felix and, in some more detail, in De utilitate credendi 10–12 and in Contra Adimantum 16), his most specific and circumstantial treatment is in the work Contra Faustum. Many of Manichaean bishop Faustus’ 33 capitula were concerned with the Old Testament and its lasting value, but it is particularly in his Manichaean theses of capitulum XIX24 that Augustine goes into the questions ‘why, and to what extent, the Jewish sacramenta have been instituted by divine authority, and afterwards, in due time, by the same authority taken over by the people of God, to whom the mystery of eternal life has been revealed’. Therefore Augustine’s reference here is, most probably, to his books Against Faustus, especially to Contra Faustum XIX.

In passing it may be added that Augustine’s final words in the quoted passage (‘And I shall have more to say on this topic at a more convenient moment in this present work’) constitute a strong testimony to a premeditated structure of the huge work De civitate Dei,25 the promise made while dictating these words in c. 416 would be fulfilled in c. 424, that is, some 8 years later by dictating to his stenographers Book XVII,3–20.

Evil not a substance and its consequences for orthodox Christology

The third passage in which some explicit anti-Manichaean polemics can be detected is in Book X, 24. Here, in the context of his debate with Porphyry on the one true ‘principle’ of purification and regeneration, Augustine says:

Bonus itaque ursusque Mediator ostendit peccatum esse malum, non carnis substantiam vel naturam … [And so the good and true Mediator showed that it is sin which is evil, not the substance or nature of the flesh …] (DCCD, Book X, 24)

This is a well-known feature of Augustine’s anti-Manichaean polemics. It is repeated innumerable times in his books, tracts, sermons and letters: evil is not a substance and, consequently, it is not the substance or nature of the flesh. This opinion is stated here in the context of the idea that otherwise Christ, in His incarnation, could not have assumed the human flesh.

Perhaps we can also read the immediately subsequent words as deliberately directed against the Manichaecans:

quae cum anima hominis et suscepti sine peccato potuit et haberet, et morte deponi et in melius resurrectione mutari.

Which [i.e., the substance or nature of the flesh], along with a human soul, could be assumed and maintained without sin, and could be laid aside at death and changed into something better at resurrection.

Not only the Platonists, but also the Manichaecans rejected the idea of a Mediator who came into the human flesh. In the case of the Manichaecans, this rejection has usually been considered to be a variant of ‘doceticism’,26 although some recent researchers prefer to speak of a ‘two-natures-doctrine’.27 The latter seems to agree with some Manichaean texts such as the

20 See also Eusebius, Historia ecclesiastica VII,31 (Eusebius, The Ecclesiastical History. With an English Translation by J.E.L. Oulton ... in two volumes, 1973, Harvard University Press, Cambridge / William Heinemann, London,p. 216). Other references include Epiphanius, Panarion 66,1; Cyrilus of Jerusalem, Cat. VI,24; Zacharias of Mytilene, Seven Capita, cap. 1; Johannes of Caesarea, Hom. 1,7; etc.

21 Cf. for example, Augustine, De haer. 46,1 (CCL 46, 312): ‘Manichæi a quodam Persa exsistere quotiens quia ornabantur Manis, quaeuis et ipsum, cum eius insana doctrina coepisset in Graecia praedicari, Manichœorum discipli mulierem deutilantes nomen insanias: The Manichaecans started by a certain Persian called Manis. When his insane teaching began to be preached in Greece, his disciples preferred to call him Manichaeus to avoid the word for madness’.

22 Some examples out of many: for deliramentum etc., see De mor. Man. 30; Conf. III,6,10; V,3,6; C. Faust. II,4; V,10; V,18; XIII,6; XX,9; XX,30; XII,30; for insanias etc. De mor. Man. 30 and 53; Conf. V,3,6; IX,4,8; C. Faust. VI,8; XII,18; XV,7; XX,9; XX,30; XII,30, and the just quoted passage from De haer. 46,1. See also below, in the discussion of DCCD X,22.

23 Translation in accordance with Babcock (2012:204–205).

24 CSEL 25, 503–535. Here, in an elaborate discussion of the Old Testament sacraments, one also reads (c. Faust. XIX,13) expressions such as: ‘Praeinde prima sacramenta, quae observabantur et celebrabantur ex lege, praenuntiatum est Christi venientur: quae cum suo adventu Christus ingruitavit, aliquot sunt, et idem oblata, quas impleto: Thus, the first sacraments [sc. of the OT], which were observed and celebrated according to the law, were predictions of the coming of Christ; and, when Christ fulfilled them by His advent, they were abolished, and were abolished because they were fulfilled’.

25 On this wonderful structure, see, for example. Van Dort (1991:74–77).


Psalms of Herakleides in the Coptic Manichaean Psalmbook; the former seems to be correct from the orthodox Christian point of view as expressed by Augustine. Most recently, however, Jason BeDuhn has stressed the fact that we should interpret Manichaean Christology within its own premises and context, which entails neither the ‘western’ dualism of spirit and matter nor the idea of an atoning sacrifice for human sin. In essence, the Manichean Jesus is the Revealor who brings ‘gnosis’; He is ‘a transcendent, divine being that somehow becomes vulnerable to evil while never surrendering his divine identity and transcendent destiny’. 30

The soul is not air; Evil angels fell by their own choice; The devil fallen from the truth; The right explanation of John 8:44 and 1 John 3:8; Wickedness is not a Nature; God saw his good creation; No natural evil; God’s goodness as cause of the world; Evil is not a nature but the privation of good; Particulars of the Manichaean cosmogonic myth and doctrine of God

The most extensive and most important references to Manichaeism appear in Book XI. This book has a pivotal place in De civitate Dei. Augustine here starts the second part of his work in which he will deal with ‘the origin, course and destined ends’ of the two cities. He derives his information from the Scriptures: the creation narrative discloses the origin of the civitas Dei, namely in the world of angels; the terra civitas came into being through the fall of angels. These two ‘cities’ (civitates) or ‘communities’ (societates) are opposed to each other as light and darkness. The ‘devil’s city’ (civitas diaboli) originated from aversion to God: this aversion exists through the will, not through the nature of the fallen angels. It is in this context that Augustine also feels obliged to elaborate on the sin of the angels (11–15), the goodness of the creation (18–23) and on the Trinity (10 and 24–29). It is particularly in these sections of the 11th book that we find his anti-Manichaean polemic.

The first relevant passage is in XI,10:

A translation in accordance with Bettenson (1972:442).

30.Cf. for example, De Genesi contra Manichaeos I,4,7: ‘... quia ubi lucis non est, tenebras sunt, non quia aliquid sunt tenebras, sed ipsa lucis缺席ia sunt tenebrae dicuntur ...; ... where there is no light, there is darkness, not because darkness is something; rather the very absence of light is called darkness’. An essential doctrine of Manichaeism is that darkness is a substance.

More important in this context are Augustine’s remarks in XI,13. Here, he discusses the question ‘whether all the angels were so created in one common state of felicity, that those who fell were not aware that they would fall, and that those who stood received assurance of their own perseverance after the ruin of the fallen’. In discussing this and related topics, Augustine inevitably has to demarcate his position against his former coreligionists. Hence, time and again in Book XI and also in the first part of Book XII, when he is giving his exposition on the origin of the two civitates, questions return that have been dealt with in his endeavours to give a satisfactory explanation of the first chapters of the Bible, such as in De Genesi contra Manichaeos 32.

33.Cf. e.g. C. Fel, I,19 (CSEL 25,825): ‘... poter, qui generavit ibi lucis filios, et aor et ipsa terra et ipsi filii una substantia sunt et aequa sunt omnia: The Father who begot there the children of light and the air and the land itself and the children themselves are one substance and are all equal’; Epiphanius, Panarion 66,28 (Holl 66 = Acta Archetiel 10,7), in the translation by Williams (2013:251): ‘and whoever moves his hand injures the air, because the air is the soul of men, animals, birds, fish, reptiles and everything in the world’.

34.CF. DCD VIII,2. 35. Cf. for example, De Gen. ad litt. VII,12 (CSEL, 28,211–212) and VII,4 (ibid. 203–204); cf. the commentary by P. Agaësse and A. Solignac in Bibliothèque Augustinienne 48, 701. For Tertullian’s opinion, see, for example, De anima 9,4,7 and J.H. Wasmink’s commentary in loco.

36.CSEL 91, 73.


Like so many parts of De civitate Dei, this passage looks like a digression in a long excursus (in this case on the Trinity). It may be rendered as follows:

I do not mean by this to give the impression that the soul is air, as has been supposed by some who could not conceive of an immaterial substance. But there is a certain similarity between the two, in spite of a great disparity, which makes it quite appropriate to speak of the illumination of the immaterial soul by the immaterial light of the simple Wisdom of God, in terms of the illumination of the material air by the material light. For the darkness of the atmosphere is due to loss of light – for when we speak of the darkness of any locality in the material world we are in fact referring to air deprived of light—and so we naturally speak of the ‘darkening’ of the soul when it is deprived of the light of Wisdom. (Bettenson 1972:442)

The unspecified ‘some’ (quidam) could be the Manichaeans, but a reference to the previously discussed pre-Socratics Anaximenes and Diogenes of Apollonia, or to the Stoics, seems to be more likely. However, a straightforward attack on Manichaean tenets, so well-known to Augustine and so often opposed by him, crops up in the remark that darkness is none other than air deprived of light. We may compare here, for instance, his De Genesi contra Manichaeos 1,4,7: ‘... quia ubi lucis non est, tenebras sunt, non quia aliquid sunt tenebras, sed ipsa lucis absintia tenebrae dicuntur ...; ... where there is no light, there is darkness, not because darkness is something; rather the very absence of light is called darkness’. An essential doctrine of Manichaeism is that darkness is a substance.
(written c. 388–390), De Genesi ad litteram liber imperfectus (c. 393; 426), De Genesi ad litteram libri XII (c. 401–c. 414) and, moreover, in the last three books of the Confessiones (c. 400). All these endeavours reflect, more or less, his enduring struggle with the questions posed by the Manicheans and with their rejection of the Old Testament in general and the creation narratives from Genesis in particular.

In XI,13, then, Augustine tries to answer the question of whether the angels, in their original bliss, knew their future, that is, their fall or perseverance. It is not by chance that the author here remarks that the offending angels ‘were deprived of that light by their own wickedness’ (qui sua prauidate illa luce priuati sunt), and that ‘those who are now evil fell, by their own choice, from that light of goodness’ (isti, qui nunc mali sunt, ab illo bonitatis lumine sua voluntate coactissimis).18 These and similar remarks, which are particularly present in Book XI and Book XII,19 belong to his common anti-Manichean polemics.

Augustine attacks the Manicheans expressis verbis, however, after he has first posed the question that ‘perhaps someone (quis) will quote what the Lord says in the Gospel about the devil: “He was a murderer from the beginning and did not stand fast in the truth” [John 8:44] and from this text not only infers that the devil was a murderer from the beginning, that is, from the beginning of the human race, (…) but also that from the beginning of his own creation the devil did not stand fast in the truth’. (…) ‘In this way one may also explain the saying of the blessed apostle John [1 John 3:8], “the devil sins from the beginning,” that is, from the time he was created he refused righteousness, which can only be possessed by a will that is reverently subjected to God’.

The direct attack which follows immediately after this reasoning20—a reasoning that in fact is very similar to the Manichean opinions—then runs as follows:

_Huc sententiae quisquis adquiescit, non cum illis haereticis sapit, id est Manichea, et si quae aliae pestes ita sintuent, quod saepe quandam propriam tamquam ex adverso quodam principio diabolus habeat naturam malii, tali veritate dispiciunt, ut, cum verba ista evangelia in auctoritate nosbiscum habeant, non attentant non propriae tamquam ex adverso quodam principio diabolus habeat naturam malii; quia tanta uanitate dispiciunt, ut, cum verba ista evangelia in auctoritate nosbiscum habeant, non attentant non dixisse Dominum: A veritate aliquis fuit; sed: In veritate non stetit, ubi a veritate lapsum intelligi voluit, in qua utique si stetisset, eius participes factus beatus cum sanctis angelis permaneret._

In translation:21

Whoever assents to this opinion does not fall into those heretics, namely the Manicheans, nor with any other ‘pests’ that may suppose that the devil has derived from the beginning an evil nature proper to himself. Such people are so befuddled by vanity that, although they agree with us in recognizing the authority of the words of the Gospel, they do not notice that the Lord did not say, ‘the devil was by nature unconnected with the truth’, but ‘he did not stand fast in the truth’ [John 8:44]. By this He meant us to understand that the devil has fallen from the truth. If he had stood fast in the truth, he would have shared in it and would have remained in blessedness along with the holy angels. (Bettenson 1972:445–446)

First, one may find in this passage some general information on the Manicheans and some disparaging comments which are also present elsewhere in Augustine’s works. For instance, the statement that ‘such people are so befuddled by vanity’ (qui tanta uanitate desipiunt) is a fierce attack on their pretended to proclaim the truth22 and, in all likelihood, in the verb desipiunt we may even hear a polemic wordplay on Mani’s name.23 So, too, the remark that the Manicheans, like other ‘pests’, opine that the devil’s evil nature comes from an adverse principle, can be substantiated from other places in Augustine’s œuvre.24 Moreover, this reported doctrine is in full agreement with a great many texts of the Manicheans themselves.

Fairly unique, however, and only evidenced by two other passages in Augustine’s works, is the account of the Manicheans’ agreement ‘with us in recognising the words of the Gospel’ (cum verba ista evangelia in auctoritate nobiscum habeant). This refers to their acceptance of John 8:44. The fact that the (African and/or Italian) disciples of Mani made use of this text in their disputes with the Catholic Christians is corroborated by Augustine’s references in his anti-Manichean works De duabus animalibus25 and, in particular, Contra Adimantum.26 From the last mentioned passage, it may be seen, for example, C. Faust. XIV (CSEL 25,428): ‘Ecce, quas uantitates pro ueritate...’; Contra Adim. 42,4 (CCL 37,137–138): ‘Oinem enim uantitatem...; ut ego tansu nesciam uantitatem dilexi...’; in faelicia (mss.phantomsata/phantomatibus) enim, quas pro ueritate tenueram, uantitas everat...; De mor. excl. cath. 34 (CSEL 80,39): ‘Longe omnia longe breuiore tempore quid interi inter ueritatem uantitatemque cerneret.’ Cf. e.g. De nat. boni 18 (CSEL 25,862): ‘Non eam dicit, quam Manichaeus hylen appellat demensitam uantitatem nesciam...’; C. Sec. 21 (CSEL 25,938): ‘...non quam Manichaei uantitas finuit?’ De haer. 46,3 (CCL 46,313): ’Ex his ausus suis fabulis uans...’

In any case, apart from the puns mentioned above, the Manicheans are also designated ironically as the sapientes (cf. e.g. De mar. Man. 53). Cf. for desipuit e.g. C. Fust. XIV (CSEL 25,436): ‘usque adeo tamen desipueit’; ibid. XVI,12 (583): ‘scit desipueit’.

44.For example, De haer. 46,2 (CCL 46,313): ‘iste duo principia inter se diuerfa et aduerfa, eademque aerterna et coaeterna, hoc est semper fuisse, compositum, duab. naturas esse contrarium et unam substantiam, boni sollicit et mali, sequens alios antiquos haereticos, opinatus est.’ Cf. e.g. Contra XIII,30,45; De mar. Man. 73; C. Fort. 1.

46.Debu. anim. 9 (CSEL 25,61): ‘Recitarent aduersum me voces illas evangeliicas: uos praeterita non auditis, quia non est ex des; uos ex patre diabolo estis [John 8:44].48. ego quoque contra recipitem: omnia per ipsum factum est sine ipso ipsius factum est nihil [1 Joh. 3,3]...’

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46.53). Cf. for...
be inferred that Adimantus or Adda(i), one of Mani’s intimate and most influential disciples (see e.g. Liew 1992:91–92 and, in particular, Van den Berg 2010:11–48), made use of this text in his disputations with the Christian Catholics (cf. Van den Berg 2010:107, 105, 158–159). As late as the year 417, we hear an echo of this in Augustine’s City of God.

After having explained the full meaning of John 8:44 in chapter 14 of Book XI, Augustine’s next reference to the Manichaeans is in XI,15. This chapter opens with the sentence:

Illud etiam, quod ait de diabolo lohannes: Ab initio diabolus peccat, non intelligens, si natura tali est, nullo modo esse peccatum.

As for what John says about the devil, ‘The devil is a sinner from the beginning’ [1 John 3:8], they [sc., the Manichaeans] do not realize that if the devil is a sinner by nature, there can really be no question of sin in his case.

From the context it is evident that those who ‘do not understand’ the words of 1 John 3:8 are the Manichaeans. As in the case of the earlier quote in XI,13, (‘… ut sic intellegatur etiam quod beatus lohannes apostolus ait: Ab initio diabolus peccat … : … and so this is the meaning of the saying of the blessed John,’ ‘The devil sins from the beginning’ …’) we may question whether or not Augustine states that they made use of this text of the Bible. From Augustine’s emphasis on the right explanation of 1 John 3:8, however, and from the wording of the text itself, it seems most likely that the Western Manichaeans did use it in their polemics with the Christian Catholics.47 In any case, several testimonies demonstrate that they made use of 1 John.48 In the sentence under discussion Augustine rebuts the argument that, if the devil is indeed a sinner by nature, there can be no question of sin at all. This is in line with his common anti-Manichaean argumentation.

The same goes for Augustine’s remark later in the chapter, after he has discussed some Old Testament texts to support his case. Here again, we find the quotations from John 8:44 and 1 John 3:8 combined in an anti-Manichaean context:

Quae si alter continentur intelligi nequeunt, oportet etiam illud, quod dictum est: In uritate non stetit [John 8:44], sic accipiamus, quod in uritate fuerit, sed non permanerit; et illud, quod ab initio diabolus peccat [1 John 3:8], non ab initio, ex quo creatur est, peccare putandum est, sed ab initio peccati, quod ab ipso superbia coeperit esse peccatum.

If this is the most natural explanation of those passages,49 we are bound to take the saying, ‘He did not stand fast in the truth’, as meaning that he ‘are bound to take the saying, ‘He did not stand fast in the truth’, as meaning that he

Another undoubtedly anti-Manichaean remark is in Augustine’s explanation of Genesis 1:4 in XI,21: the statement ‘God saw that it was good’ can only signify his approval of work done with the true artist’s skill; because God did not in the actual achievement of the work first learn that it was good, but, on the contrary, ‘not one of those works would have been done, if He had not known it beforehand (mihil eorum fieret, si et fuisse incognitum)’. Both from De Genesi contra Manichaeos and from Augustine’s Contra Faustum we learn that the Manichaeans objected against this particular item of the creation narrative by saying that God did not have foreknowledge of the result but, on the contrary, that He was astonished by it.50

The final passage of Book XI that mentions the Manichaeans expressis verbis is in chapter 22. In fact, this whole chapter is directed against their opinions, as it is ‘on those who do not approve of certain things which are part of this good creation (universitas rerum) of a good Creator, and who think that there

47.Although the text is neither mentioned in Van den Berg (2010), nor in the-still-most comprehensive study on the subject of the Bible in Manicheism, that is A. Böhlig’s typewritten dissertation Die Bibel bei den Manichäern (Münster 1947), now available in Nagel and Richter (2013).

48.See e.g. C. Fel. 8,15 (CSEL 25,844): the Manichean Felix quoting John 1:15 (not noted by Zycha in his CSEL-edition); Allberry (1938-40, lines 31–32) (reference to 1 in J 23).

49.The reference is to Isaiah 14:12 and Ezekiel 28:13.

50.Cf. De gen. ad inf. 11,14 (CSEL 22,79): Manichaeism’s opinion on the creation of the minutissima animalia (in an anti-Manichaean context) and see also XI,20 sq. (CSEL 28,352 ff) for his discussion of the devil’s original nature with reference to, for example, Job 40:14 and Psalm 103:26.

51.Cf. Breuicus XI,17: ‘Utrum matthiae non naturam esse, sed condra naturam cui, opus peccandum causa non conditor causa est, sed voluntas’.

52.De gen. c. man. 8,13 (CSEL 91,79): ‘Et dixit deius: fiat lux. Et facta est lux (Gn 1:3). Hoc non solent reprehendere Manichaei, sed illud quod sequitur, et vitid deus lucem qua bonus est (Gn 1:4); dicunt enim: ergo non nobis Deus lucem creat, sed sui voluntatis nostrae voluit, ut lucem crearet. Misere homines, quibus dissipat, quod dei noluerat opera sua: ‘And God said: There let be light. And the light was made’. The Manichaeans do not really [!] fault with this, but with what follows: ‘And God saw that it was light’. They say, ‘Hence, God had not known the light, or had not known that it was good’…’. C. Faust. 103,599 (CSEL 28,352 ff). In the following they cite Genesi 1:4 (Initium ergo eius figmentum est Domini non ab initio, ex quo creatus est, peccare, sed usque in die, in ueritate fuerit, sed non permanserit; et illud, quod ab initio diabolus peccat, non posset, saepe iniquitatem committere, quod ei fuisset incognitum). Another undoubtedly anti-Manichaean remark is in De Genesi contra Manichaeos and from Augustine’s Contra Faustum we learn that the Manichaeans objected against this particular item of the creation narrative by saying that God did not have foreknowledge of the result but, on the contrary, that He was astonished by it.


Directed against his former coreligionists, too, is the final statement (with reference to Job 40:14 Vulgate and Psalm 103/4:26) that the beginning of the devil is the Lord’s handiwork (Initium ergo eius figmentum est Dominii) and that even the smallest animals are brought into being by God (non enim est ulla natura etiam in extremis infimisque bestiolis, quam non ile constituit). A similar reasoning (once more with reference to both Job 40:14 and Psalm 103/4:26) returns in XI,17, where it is argued once again that ‘wickedness is not nature, but contrary to nature, and has its origin not in the Creator but in the will’.51
is a natural evil’. Augustine opens with the remark that, on the basis of the argument just given (namely in § 21: God’s goodness is the cause of this good world), ‘a valid and appropriate explanation (causam tam iustam atque idoneam) of creation has been found’. This cause, however, has not been recognised by ‘some heretics’:

Hanc tamen causam ... quidam heretici non uiderunt, quia egenam carnis luxius fragilemque mortalitatem iam de iusto supllicio uenientem, dam ei non conuenient, plurima offendunt, sicut ignis aut frigus aut fera bestia aut quid eius modi; nec attendunt, quam uel in suis locis naturisque uigent pulchroque ordine disponatur, quantumque universi stirpem pro suis portionibus (ms. positionibus) decoris tamquam in communem rem publicam conferunt uel nobis ipsis, si eis congruerit atque scienter utamur, commoditatis adtribuant, ita ut uenena ipsa, quae per inconuenientiam perniciosa sunt, conuenienter adhibita in salubria medicamenta uertantur; quamque a contrario etiam haec, quibus delectantur, sicut cibus et potus et ista lux, immoderato et inopportuno usu noxia sentiantur.

Linde nos admonet disina prudentia non res insipientes uituperare ...

But some heretics do not see this cause, because there are so many things which do not suit the inadequacy and frailty of our mortal flesh, which have already come under deserved punishment, many things which cause distress, like fire, cold, wild animals and so on. They do not observe the value of those things in their own sphere and in their own nature, their position in the splendid order of the providential and the contribution they make by their own special beauty to the whole material scheme, as to a universal commonwealth. They even fail to see how much those same things contribute to our benefit, if we make wise and appropriate use of them. Even poisons, which are disastrous when improperly used, are turned into wholesome medicines by their proper application. By contrast, things which give pleasure, like food and drink, and even light itself, are experienced as harmful when used without restraint and in improper ways. Divine providence thus warns us not to indulge in silly complaint about the state of affairs …

There can be no doubt that the reference quidam haeretici denotes the Manichaeans. Besides, their name is specified at the end of the chapter: ‘Sic autem Manichaei non desiperent uel potius insanirent ...: The Manichaeans would not drivel, or rather, rave in such a style as this …’. Yet, even without that explicit mention of their name, the real identity of the ‘heretics’ would have become evident by what is said about them. Augustine communicates that ‘there are many things which cause them distress, like fire, cold, wild animals and so on’. He also says that these heretics ‘do not observe the value of those things in their own sphere’; ‘that they even fail to see how much those same things contribute to our benefit if we make wise and appropriate use of them’; and that this holds even for ‘poisons’.

This whole train of thought particularly brings to mind De moribus Manichaeorum VIII, 11–13. Here, Augustine tells that, with regard to the question ‘Quid sit malum: What is evil?’ one of the Manichean promates (‘one whose instructions we heard with great familiarity and frequency’, perhaps the Manichean bishop Faustus) used to say about a person who held that evil was not a substance, ‘I should like to put a scorpion in the man’s hand’: thus pretending to provide decisive proof that evil is a substance. This ‘childish answer’ may illustrate the ‘childish way’ in which this Manichaean teacher and the other Manichaeans pretended ‘that evil is fire, poison, a wild beast, and so on’ (malum esse ignem, uenenum, ferram et cetera huissmodi). Augustine then expounds, as in some other passages of his writings, that all of these things have their value in their own places, and that poison may even be a medicine. In the selfsame chapters of De moribus, he also touches the question ‘that food and drink and even light itself, when used without restraint and in improper ways, are experienced as harmful’. Besides, in the admonition ‘not foolishly to vituperate things’ we may hear a polemic against the insane Manicheans.

When, a little further on in XI, 22, Augustine remarks that:

... cum omino natura nulla sit malum nomenque hoc non sit nisi privationis boni

... there is absolutely no evil nature: ‘evil’ is merely a name for the privation of good

He restates his well-known anti-Manichaean polemic. As it is reported in his Confessiones (VII, 12, 18), the definition of evil as privatio boni, which he borrowed from the Neoplatonists (cf. e.g. Plotinus, Enn. III, 2, 5), played a part as early as his Milan period. It is this definition which, time and again, recurs in his works and which is particularly directed against the Manicheans.

Thus we see it in De civitate XI, 9, and again in XIII, 6–7 and XIV, 11, among others.

The remainder of XI, 22 is clearly anti-Manichean, and saturated with typical terms and data which flow from a well-informed memory:

Nec sane multum mirandum est, quod hi, qui nonnullam nalam putant esse naturam suo quodam contrario exortam propagatamque principio,volunt accipere istam causam creationis rerum, ut bonus Deus conderet bona, credentes eum potius ad haec mundana molimina rebellantis aduersum se mali repellendi extrema necessitate perductum suamque naturam bonam malo coherendo superandoque miscuisse, quam turpissime pollutam et crudelissime captivatum et oppressum


54.With the curious remark that this reason (‘a bono Deo bona opera fliert: good works should be made by a good God’) was also given by Plato. The reference will be to Timaeus 28a in Cicero’s translation; cf. BA 35, 94–96 n. 3.

55.Once again on the Manicheans and their madness (insania); see above, n. 22 and main text; cf. e.g. n. 17.

56.Cf. Conf. VII,11 for the long and private interviews A. and his friends had with this Manichean bishop.


59.Cf. De mor. Man. 52, where A. tells that the elect are sometimes obliged to eat so much (light) food, that they almost burst, and that, in Rome, some children who had been compelled to eat the rest of their food even died.

60.Cf. the wording desipiunt above. For the second part of the passage one may also compare De Gen. c. Man. 1,16,25–26 (CSEL 91,91–94), an explanation of Genesis 1:24–25 against the Manicheans.

61.See, out of the many examples, De mor. Man. 7.
labore magnō uix mundet ac liberet; non tamen totem, sed quod eius non potuerit ab illa inquisitione purgari, tegmen a cœlum futurum hostis uicti et inclusi. Sic autem Manichei non desipere uel potius insinuare, si Dei naturam, sicut est, incommutabilēm atque omnino incorruptibilem credereunt, cui nocere nulla re posse; animam uero, quae voluntate mutarii deterui et peccato corrumpi potuit atque ita incommutabilēs ueritatis luce priuari, non Dei partem nec eius naturae, quae Dei est, sed ab illo cothaidam longe irparem Conditori christiana sanitate sentirent.

It is surely little cause for wonder that those who imagine that there is some evil nature, which is generated and propagated by some independent ‘opposing principle’, refuse to accept that the cause for the creation was this, that the good God created a good creation. They believe instead that God was compelled to the creation of the vast structure of this universe by the utter necessity of repelling the evil which fought against Him, that He mixed His good nature with the evil for the sake of restraining and conquering it; and that this good nature of God was thus so shamefully polluted and so cruelly oppressed and held captive, that it was only with the greatest labour that he may cleanse and deliver it. He would not be able to cleanse from that defilement is to serve as a prison and chain of the conquered and incarcerated enemy. The Manicheans would not be mad or rather rage in this manner, if they believe the nature of God to be, as it really is, unchangeable and absolutely incorruptible, and that nothing can do it harm. And if they had held, according to sound Christian teaching, that the soul, which could change for the worse by its own will, and could be corrupted by sin, is not a part of God, nor of the same nature as God, but is created by Him, and is far unequal to its Creator.

Here Augustine demonstrates that, as late as 417, he has a thorough knowledge of the particulars of the Manichean cosmogonic myth. He makes mention of the Manichean ‘opposing principle’ (principium contrarium) from which evil would have been ‘generated and propagated’; of the fact that ‘they believe that God was compelled to create the vast structure of this universe by the utter necessity of repelling the evil which fought against Him’; that He had to mingle (miscusse) His good nature with evil in order to restrain and overcome it; that this nature of God ‘was thus so shamefully polluted, most cruelly oppressed and held captive that He scarcely could clean it and set it free’; that even then God could not fully succeed but that ‘the part which cannot be purified from that defilement (inquinatio) is to serve as a cover (tegmen) and chain (uncicum) of the conquered and incarcerated enemy’.

All these particulars can be substantiated from Augustine’s anti-Manichean works. Moreover, they are in full conformity with the works of the Manicheans themselves.

As far as we can see, however, this passage – although notably accurate – does not provide new information about Augustine’s knowledge of Manichean tenets or technical terms. The same goes for his next anti-Manichean remark that ‘the nature of God is unchangeable and completely incorruptible, and that nothing can do it harm’, and ‘that the soul is not a part of God, nor of the same nature as God’. This, too, is in full agreement both with Manichean doctrine and Augustine’s polemics against it. In agreement with the particulars listed in the previous analyses as well is Augustine’s disparaging description of his former coreligionists. Here, too, they are those who ‘talk nonsense (desiperent) or rather rave (insinuèrent)’ and do not accept ‘sound Christian teaching’ (christiana sanitas). The implication of this last remark is that, anyhow, Augustine still considers the Manicheans to be Christians.

**Evil not by nature but by will; earthly bodies not evil by nature; evil will not natural; the bliss of sex in paradise; the devil not evil by nature**

After the preceding analyses, the remaining more or less explicit references to Manicheism may be discussed briefly. In XII,1, where Augustine continues his exposition on the angels and their nature, he remarks inter alia:

Angelorum bonorum et malorum inter se contrarios adpetitus non naturis princiicipisque diversis, cum Deus omnium substantiarum bonus auctor et conditor utroque creuerit, sed voluntatibus et cupiditatis extitisse dubitare fas non est ...

It is absolutely wrong to doubt that the opposed inclinations of the good and the evil angels did not arise from any difference in nature or origin, since God, the good author and creator of all substances, created both, but [they did arise] from a difference in their wills and desires ...

This is a reiteration of his well-known rejection (see e.g. Book X and Book XI) of the Manichean idea that evil is a separate and independent substance. Anti-Manichean polemics of the same kind occur, for instance, in XII,3 (e.g. ‘natura igitur contraria non est Deo, sed uitium: it is not nature, therefore, which is contrary to God, but vice’; ‘Deus ... inmutabilis est et...')

62 Cf. for the Manichean doctrine of the commixtio e.g. De nat. boni 44 (CSEL 25, 884), a quotation from Mani’s Thesaurus: C. Fort. 1 & 7 (CSEL 25, 83–84); C. Fort. II, 1.3.7.11 (CSEL 25, 827–829); XXI,15 (CSEL 841, 851); C. Faust. I,5 (CSEL 25,258); VII,4 (290); VII,8 (296–297); VIII,2 (307); XXI,10 (580); XXI,14 (586); XXII,98 (705), and De haer. 46,5 (CCLI 46,323); for inquisitor in an eschatological context e.g. C. Fort. II,16 (CSEL 25,845); C. Faust. XXII,10 (717); C. Faust. XXIII,19 (781); and for uncicum connected with the Manichean doctrine of the globus e.g. C. Faust. XII,6 (384); XXI,15 (587); XXI,16 (587); XXII,22 (617). For tegmen, however, CCD XI,22. The same goes for the two thouroughgoing studies of Decret and Bennett just mentioned in the previous note as well as for Lieu a.o. (2010) and Clackson a.o. (1998).

63 See for the Manichæan doctrinal tenets (apart from the leading work of Lieu already mentioned in n. 48) e.g. Böhlīg (1980). In this excellent collection of Manichean texts translated from both the Western and Eastern sources there is ample proof for the particulars of the Manichean myth as given here by A., as is in the pioneering work of Adam (1969) and, e.g., in H. J. Polotsky’s famous Abrīs (1971:101–144). None of them, however, makes mention of DCD XI,22. The same goes for the two thouroughgoing studies of Decret and Bennett just mentioned in the previous note as well as for Lieu a.o. (2010) and Clackson a.o. (1998).

64 Perhaps with the small exception of tegmen (cf. n. 65), which might be a technical term in Manichean texts translated in Latin. The passage in A.’s works which comes closest to it is in C. Faust. XXII,16 (CSEL 25, 588–589): ‘Missae est enim ad inextinquam transmissionem pars dei, ut esset, unde tegernetur globus, quo in ptenetrum hostis uius sequerendus est: For part of your God was sent to suffer hopeless contamination, so that there might be a covering for the mass in which the enemy is to be buried for ever alive’. In the Coptic Kephalaia (Polotsky & Böhlīg 1940:105,7 f) we read: ‘They [the souls of all the sinners] will make the cover of this final lump when all the likenesses and images of every shape will be nailed in it. Also, they will be bound by this last fetter for eternity, and they will be laid as a foundation [or: footstole], and a base [or: mat], and a cover of this Ark’ (translation in accordance with Smagina 1990:116–118; cf. Gardner (1995:109).
The Manichaeans are mentioned again expressis verbis in XIV,5 ("Non quidem Platonici sicut Manichaei desipunt, ut tanquam mali naturam terrena corpora detestantur: The Platonists are not so foolish as the Manichaeans in that they detest our earthly bodies as an evil nature").65 but in his exposition Augustine does not pursue the Manichaeans doctrine any further. In XIV,11, for instance, there is an echo of anti-Manichean polemics in the statement that 'an evil will is not natural but against nature' (mala voluntas ... non sit secundum naturam, sed contra naturam). When, in XIV,21, Augustine discusses the problem of marriage and, at this stage in his career (c. 419), upholds the view that even in paradise there must have been sexual union (but without evil libido),66 he has to defend this view against 'who are evidently unaware of the bliss that existed in paradise'. In this context he then says that 'some of them utterly reject the holy Scriptures, and even scoff at them in their unbelief, in the passage [sc. Gen. 1:28] where we are told that after their sin our first parents were ashamed of their nakedness and that they covered their pudenda'. Here, again, Augustine must have in mind the Manichaeans, for that they did not accept the Genesis saying Crescete et multiplicamini, even if derided it, is for no malum est nature' (even the nature of the Devil himself is evil, in so far as it is a foolish vices to the nature of the flesh').

3. A few passages in De civitate Dei even provide information on (Western) Manichaean doctrine (such as the Manichaean eschatological 'cover' called tegment) and its polemical stance towards the Catholic Christian faith (such as in their exegesis of John 8:44 and 1 John 3:8) which are fairly unique.

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