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THE ROLE OF PLATONISM IN AUGUSTINE'S 386 CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY¹

Augustine's conversion to Christianity in A.D. 386 is a pivotal moment not only in his own life, but in Christian and world history, for the theology of Augustine set the course of theological and cultural development in the western Christian church. But to what exactly was Augustine converted?² Scholars have long debated whether he really converted to Christianity in 386, whether he was a Platonist, and, if he adhered to both Platonism and Christianity, which was dominant in his thought. The debate of the last thirteen decades spans an immense body of literature in multiple languages (mostly French, English, and German). In this literature four major views on Augustine's conversion may be discerned. The first view is associated with Gaston Bossier and Adolph von Harnack, and was famously championed by Prosper Alfaric: that Augustine in 386 converted to neo-Platonism but *not* to Christianity. Second, there is the view recently promoted by Catherine Conybeare: that Augustine in 386 converted to Christianity and *rejected* neo-Platonism. Third, there is the view that he converted to Christianity and was *also* a neo-Platonist; the most famous adherents of this view are Robert J. O'Connell and Pierre Courcelle. Finally, there is the view recently promoted by Carol Harrison. According to this view, Augustine committed to Christianity in 386; yet he did not utterly reject neo-Platonism, for he aimed to develop a Christian faith that was informed by neo-Platonic insight.

¹ This study emerged from my Ph.D. dissertation, and thanks are due to my dissertation readers: Michael P. Foley, Thomas S. Hibbs, Robert Kruschwitz, Robert Roberts, and David Lyle Jeffrey. Even more, I am grateful to my wife Shonda for her support during this time. The interested reader would do well to consult the book that had its origins in the same dissertation: *The Conversion and Therapy of Desire: Augustine's Theology of Desire in the Cassiciacum Dialogues* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, forthcoming).

² I use the word "conversion" in the broad sense of a life transformation turning from a morally and spiritually inferior way of life to a superior one. Some scholars express concerns with the use of the word "conversion" to describe Augustine's change of life in 386 (see below, Section IV). I am sympathetic to these concerns, although I continue to use the word in this broad sense.

In what follows I shall first explain and distinguish these four general views, and then I shall explain why I prefer the fourth view.

I. THE FIRST VIEW: A CONVERSION TO PLATONISM, *NOT* CHRISTIANITY

In 386 Augustine abandoned his worldly pursuits of money, fame, and physical pleasures. He retreated with a few friends and relations to the country home of his friend Verecundus in Cassiciacum, near Milan. Here he wrote his first post-conversion writings, the Cassiciacum dialogues: *Contra Academicos* (*Against the Academics*), *De beata vita* (*On the Happy Life*), *De ordine* (*On order*), and *Soliloquia* (*Soliloquies*).³ These dialogues are replete with signs of neo-Platonic influence. According to the first of the four views on Augustine's conversion, he has converted to neo-Platonism, but not to Christianity. After summarizing this view and naming its major adherents I shall explain why it continues to be important although it has been generally rejected as a flawed understanding of Augustine's conversion and early writings.

Although Prosper Alfaric is the most prominent defender of this view,⁴ it has roots in two earlier works. First, there is Gaston Bossier's 1888 article on the alleged shift of Augustine's views between the early and the later writings. Second, there is Adolph von Harnack's work in the same year, which explicitly reads the *Confessions* as a misrepresentation of his mind in 386.⁵ The central notion in this reading is that the early Augustine was a follower of neo-Platonism but

³ Michael P. Foley has kindly allowed me to use his translations: *Against the Academics*, *On the Happy Life*, *On Order*, and *Soliloquies* in *The Cassiciacum Dialogues of St. Augustine*, trans. Michael P. Foley (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, Forthcoming).

⁴ *L'évolution intellectuelle de saint Augustin* (Paris: Émile Nourry, 1918). John J. O'Meara provides a helpful summary of Alfaric's book in *Studies in Augustine and Eriguena*, ed. Thomas Halton (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 121-22.

⁵ Gaston Bossier, "La Conversion de Saint Augustin," *Revue des Deux Mondes* 85 (1888). Adolph von Harnack, "Augustins Konfessionen" (Geissen: 1888). Among the English sources discussing Bossier and von Harnack is a succinct paragraph in O'Meara, *Studies in Augustine and Eriguena*, 146.

not Christianity, which he saw as an inferior substitute fit for the less intelligent masses. Only much later, so the story goes, did he finally commit to Christianity. This interpretation approaches Augustine as being at different times two very different thinkers, in the early writings a neo-Platonist and in later works such as the *Confessions* a genuine Christian. Genuinely Christian, but deceptive about his past, for such a reading tends to suspect him of dissembling and deception.⁶

Charles Boyer was a formidable adversary of Alfaric.⁷ Alfaric's view has mostly been rejected by contemporary scholars. As we shall see, it is easy to find Christian elements in the early writings. Yet Alfaric's influence continues. Two more recent scholars associated with this reading are Paula Fredrekson and Leo C. Ferrari.⁸ Brian Dobell's reading⁹ is also similar to Alfaric's, though Dobell is explicit that the *Confessions* is not deceptive.¹⁰

This interpretation has also influenced a rather common tendency to view Augustine's intellectual development as a dramatic shift from a philosophical optimism in the early writings to a theological pessimism in the later writings. Supposedly in his early days, influenced by Stoicism and neo-Platonism, he trusted reason to gain knowledge of God and had ambitious plans for *thinking* his way into the happy life. In his later days, chastened by failure to do just

⁶ Memorably, O'Meara says of Alfaric's reading of the *Confessiones* that "it was to be expected that the rationalism of the nineteenth century would reach out its coarse thumb to a book that was so sacred" (121).

⁷ *Christianisme et Néo-Platonisme dans la formation de saint Augustin*, 2d ed. (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1953); discussed in O'Meara, *Studies in Augustine and Eriugena*, 148-49.

⁸ Paula Fredrekson, "Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Tradition, and the Retrospective Self," *Journal of Theological Studies* 37.1 (April 1986). Leo C. Ferrari, *The Conversions of Saint Augustine* (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1984); "Truth and Augustine's Conversion Scene," *Collectanea Augustiniana*, Vol. 1: *Augustine: Second Founder of the Faith*, ed. J. Schnaubelt and F. Van Fleteren (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 9-19.

⁹ Brian Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25-6.

this and more knowledgeable of the writings of the Apostle Paul, he abandoned this approach and began to rely on God's grace. Carol Harrison's *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology* is aimed primarily at combating this view of Augustine's intellectual development, which corresponds to the old "two Augustines" theory of Alfarić: "the young Augustine is seen as an optimistic devotee of a Christian philosophy which promises the attainment of perfection, moral purity and tranquility, and the contemplation of wisdom."¹¹ Harrison cites Peter Brown's influential biography *Augustine of Hippo*¹² as a leading purveyor of this perspective, noting, however, that Brown retracts it in the new edition of his book.¹³

II. THE SECOND VIEW: A CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY, *NOT* PLATONISM

In *The Irrational Augustine*¹⁴ Catherine Conybeare articulates a view which is more or less the opposite of Alfarić's. Instead of reading the early Augustine as a neo-Platonist and *not* a Christian, Conybeare argues that he is a Christian and *not* a neo-Platonist. Instead of discovering *later in life* that the neo-Platonic, rationalistic quest for the happy life is doomed to failure and needs to be rethought, Conybeare thinks Augustine was developing this critique immediately after his conversion and wrote about it at Cassiciacum. After describing this view and illustrating, I shall summarize how precisely it differs from the view of Alfarić.

The Cassiciacum dialogues interact a great deal with pagan philosophers—especially the Stoics, Plotinus, and Cicero. Ancient philosophical schools including Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Platonism understood that satisfaction depends on desiring something stable. What is not

¹¹ Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 16.

¹² Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, new ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967; new ed., 2000).

¹³ Harrison, 14-17.

¹⁴ *The Irrational Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

stable is unattainable or only sporadically attainable; fortune may take away any satisfaction it grants. The ancient philosophers promised a stable happiness through their reasoning that would identify the correct stable object of desire and their practices that would help us desire it. The Cassiciacum dialogues are replete with references to this philosophical project, for example in *De beata vita* 4.25: “How will he be miserable to whom nothing happens against his will For he has his will [set on] the most certain of things.” According to Conybeare, Augustine *interacts* with this philosophical project of producing a rational and stable happy life, not to endorse it but to *reconsider* and, ultimately, *reject* it. Thus he abandons the rationalism of the Stoics and Platonists, and the otherworldliness of the Platonists. He adopts a different understanding of the good life: as an embodied activity, not a quest for disembodied intellectualism; a communal and inclusive affair, rather than the privilege of a few learned men; and a moral, rather than an intellectual, process. This new conception of the good life is inspired by Christianity, not by philosophy.

Monica, Augustine’s mother and a significant character in the dialogues, is a good example. Conybeare notes Augustine’s “epistemological inclusivity”¹⁵ and chides the scholarly literature for not taking Monica seriously. She takes Monica’s inclusion in the happy life as evidence of Augustine’s growing distrust in Platonism.¹⁶ These undertones of inclusivity and embodiment, she says, are evidence of Augustine’s lack of confidence in reason’s ability to reach happiness. One attains Monica’s wisdom through the piety Christianity requires, not through

¹⁵ Ibid., 80.

¹⁶ Ibid., 107-13, 125-38.

reason. Augustine privileges Christian morality over philosophical intellectual training as a path to God.¹⁷

Another example is the stability of virtue. Augustine treats the wise man who loves what is immune to the ravages of change as secure, maintaining a rocklike happiness through all the storms of life (*De ordine* 2.20.54). He is perfectly happy because his desires are satisfied; only one who knows and loves God can be such a rock. Conybeare sees this passage as going against the grain of the dialogue, a last look back at the pagan ideal of perfect happiness: “it is this very notion of fixity—the immovability of wisdom, of the divine, of the things that last—and the wise man’s less than simple relationship to it which Augustine has been questioning in *De ordine*.”¹⁸

Conybeare’s view is the mirror image of Alfarc’s. According to the one, young Augustine is a Platonist, not yet a Christian; he has experienced a mental conversion to Platonic immaterialism. According to the other, he is already a Christian, not a Platonist; having experienced a *moral* conversion to the Christian faith, he has left Platonism behind.

III. THE THIRD VIEW: A CONVERSION TO PLATONISM AND CHRISTIANITY

The two previous views consider Augustine in 386 as a Christian *or* a neo-Platonist, but not both. The third view on Augustine’s conversion and early writings is that he is a Christian *and* a neo-Platonist. Championed by Courcelle and O’Connell, this particular reading has it that Augustine in 386 has converted to Christianity *and* to neo-Platonism, which he sees as essentially compatible, the one the completion of the other. After explaining this view in more detail, I shall mention some of the major scholars who fall into this camp, paying special attention to O’Connell. Finally, I shall summarize how this view differs from the previous two.

¹⁷ Ibid., 129, 137.

¹⁸ Ibid., 138.

The dual influences of Platonism and Christianity are easy to see in Augustine's early writings. From the Christian side there are strong emphases on God, immortality, sin, and Jesus Christ. From the Platonist side there are emphases on the immaterial nature of God and the soul, the superiority of the soul over the body, and intellectual ascent to knowledge of immaterial reality. It is easy to assume that Augustine considers himself fully a Christian and a Platonist, integrating the two. In this integration sin is understood as an attachment to carnal reality, salvation as liberation from this attachment.

Pierre Courcelle exemplifies this way of reading Augustine. Courcelle has shown that there was a Christian neo-Platonic community at Milan at the time of Augustine's conversion.¹⁹ For Courcelle, this is evidence supporting Augustine's own neo-Platonism. It would be no exaggeration to say that Courcelle is the father of the modern view that young Augustine was both neo-Platonic and Christian. However, in one important respect he typifies Alfarić's view. Recall that Alfarić treats Augustine's autobiographical account of his state of mind in 386 as a misrepresentation. Courcelle, while he views Augustine as being a Christian neo-Platonist in both eras, views the famous conversion scene in book VIII, chapter 12, of *Confessions* as a fictional narrative.²⁰

¹⁹ Courcelle's major works are *Recherches sur les Confessions* (Paris, 1950; 2d ed., Paris 1968) and *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire* (Paris, 1963). One of the many English sources discussing Courcelle is a brief but rewarding discussion in James O'Donnell's commentary on the conversion scene in *The Confessions of Augustine: An Electronic Edition* (1992); Online Edition by Anne Mahoney for The Stoa Consortium; available at <http://www.stoa.org/hippo/>; accessed June 8, 2013, commentary on 8.12.28-29. O'Donnell mentions as "The sternest rejoinder to Courcelle" Franco Bolgiani, *La conversione di s. Agostino e l'VIIIo libro delle "Confessioni"* (Turin, 1956); referenced in O'Donnell, commentary on 8.12.29; accessed June 8, 2013.

²⁰ O'Donnell disagrees with Courcelle on this: "There is no convincing reason to doubt the facts of the narrative of this garden scene as A. presents them, and so we should depart from Courcelle" (commentary on 8.12.29).

The legacy of Courcelle continues in more recent scholars including Frederek Van Fleteren, Jon T. Beane, and Roland J. Teske.²¹ John J. O'Meara, a keen commenter on Augustine's "synthesis" of neo-Platonism and Christianity, also falls into this camp.²² There is also Philip Cary, who argues that Augustine is influenced by the neo-Platonic idea of the soul's divinity, an idea he accepts in the early writings.²³ In the *Soliloquies*, where Augustine has a dialogue with his own Reason, Cary has suggested that Reason is God.²⁴ Henry Chadwick offers a nice summary of this interpretive tradition, saying of post-conversion Augustine that "Ambrose has convinced him of the incorporeality of God, and preached so profound a fusion of Christianity with Platonic mysticism that Augustine thinks of Christ and Plato as different teachers converging in the same truths, complementary to each other."²⁵

²¹ Frederek Van Fleteren, "The Cassiciacum Dialogues and Augustine's Ascent at Milan," *Mediaevalia* 4 (1978). Jon T. Beane, "Augustine's Silence on the Fallenness of the Soul," *Augustiniana* 43 (1993). Roland J. Teske, *To Know God and the Soul: Essays on the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

²² O'Meara, 130-31, 136-38, 155-56.

²³ Phillip Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); *Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). In an earlier article Cary argues that Augustine's idea of the soul's divinity is, at Cassiciacum, transforming from a Manichean idea to a Platonic; "God in the Soul: Or, the Residue of Augustine's Manichaean Optimism," *The University of Dayton Review* 22.3 (Summer 1994), 69-79. Also of particular significance regarding the early writings is Cary's insightful article "What Licentius Learned: A Narrative Reading of the Cassiciacum Dialogues," *Augustinian Studies* 29, no. 1 (1998), 141-61.

²⁴ Cary, in 1998, says *ratio* is "the same Inner Teacher, which a few years later Augustine explicitly identifies as Christ, the Wisdom and Virtue of God," pointing to *De magistro* ("What Licentius Learned," 161). In 2003 Cary suggests that Reason may be either Christ or the divine higher part of the human soul of which Plotinus spoke, or both; he adds that Augustine may have not been sure himself who Reason is (*Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self*, 77-80). In his 2008 *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought* Cary says simply that Augustine may have been "toying with the idea of identifying this inner teacher with Christ," and elaborates on the non-godly characteristics of Reason (99).

²⁵ *Augustine of Hippo: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 29-30.

In recent decades Robert J. O’Connell has been particularly influential in promoting this understanding of Augustine’s conversion.²⁶ In addition to his studies of the relationship of Augustine’s early writings to Plotinus,²⁷ O’Connell has distinguished himself by his idea that Augustine had adopted Plotinus’ view of the fall of the soul. The major O’Connell text in this area is *Saint Augustine’s Early Theory of Man*.²⁸ Plato had suggested in *Meno* that the soul existed before it came to be in the body. Plotinus elaborates in the *Enneads*; the human soul “fell” into an embodied state as the result of sin committed in a former, disembodied state. If O’Connell is right that this is young Augustine’s view, then he has adopted a view on the origins of the soul although the Christian church had not decided the question. Moreover, he views embodiment as a bad state; the body is not the soul’s true home, and is a punishment. The soul’s purpose is to return to its original, disembodied state. Salvation is an escape from the body, not just an escape from sin; indeed, the two escapes are one.

Courcelle, O’Connell, and others in this tradition differ from Conybeare in taking Augustine to be a committed Platonist; they differ from Alfaric by taking Augustine to be a committed Christian from the time of his conversion. This strategy for interpreting Augustine leaves room for development in his thought, a development which is, perhaps, necessary for a maturing Christian neo-Platonist. Yet this view eschews the notion of a radical division between

²⁶ Ronnie J. Rombs provides a valuable summary of O’Connell’s work and its place in Augustine scholarship in the Introduction to his *Saint Augustine and the Fall of the Soul: Beyond O’Connell and His Critics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2006).

²⁷ Robert J. O’Connell, “Enneads VI, 4-5, in the works of St. Augustine,” *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 9 (1963).

²⁸ *Saint Augustine’s Early Theory of Man, A.D. 386-391* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968). Elsewhere O’Connell says that the “Incarnation, about which Plotinus himself may never have dreamt, Augustine fits neatly into the scheme of the Plotinian universe”; O’Connell, “The Enneads and St. Augustine’s Image of Happiness,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 17.3 (September 1994), 160. O’Connell also provides a helpful refutation of the Alfaric reading of young Augustine in O’Connell, “The Visage of Philosophy at Cassiciacum,” *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994).

an early and a late Augustine; this radical division is avoided largely by making both the early and the late Augustine into a Christian neo-Platonist—the late perhaps somewhat less Platonic than the early.²⁹

IV. THE FOURTH VIEW: A CONVERSION TO A CHRISTIANITY INFORMED BY PLATONISM

Augustine’s faith is informed by Platonism but not controlled by it—even in the early writings. Thus Augustine is not a neo-Platonist after his conversion, but a Christian who appreciates Platonic insights and finds them useful in the service of Christianity. This view is exemplified by Carol Harrison in her seminal work *Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity*. After summarizing Harrison’s view, I will mention other scholars whose views on Augustine’s conversion and early writings resemble hers and summarize the differences between her view and the others we have considered.

Harrison targets the contemporary equivalent of the old “two Augustines” view associated with Alfarić. According to Harrison, the later Augustine’s emphases on sin and grace and on Christian faith and practice rather than philosophy as the way to the happy life are already present in the early writings. The change in his maturing thought is “less a revolution” than a “natural evolution.”³⁰ His 386 conversion is not a *turn* to Christ so much as a *return*: “Augustine was not converted from paganism to Christianity,” for he never really left “the Christian faith in whose shadow he had always lived and thought.”³¹ Platonism provides conceptual resources for

²⁹ I do not mean that all scholars who use this interpretive schema believe Augustine’s thought develops in exactly this way, although some do. I simply mean that this view of Augustine’s development is consistent with this interpretive schema.

³⁰ Harrison, 151.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 22. On this topic see also Augustine J. Curley, *Augustine’s Critique of Skepticism: A Study of Contra Academicos* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 73. Philip Burton’s phrase “conversion back to Christianity” is suggestive; see “The Vocabulary of the Liberal Arts in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” *Augustine and the Disciplines*:

answering objections to Christianity, especially the problem of evil (*Confessions* VII), and for explaining Christian doctrines. But Platonism is not itself Christianity, and it does not on its own authority establish the truth of Christian doctrine.³²

Other scholars fall within this category of interpreters. Harrison acknowledges her indebtedness to Goulven Madec³³ Carl J. Vaught aptly summarizes this way of understanding Augustine in 386: “Augustine is a Christian who subordinates Neoplatonism to his own purposes rather than a Neoplatonist who disguises himself as a Christian theologian.”³⁴ A recent book on Augustine’s early pedagogy also seems to support the idea that his early thought has neo-Platonic elements, but is controlled by Christianity.³⁵ Another recent book does the same for his ethics and his use of rhetoric.³⁶ Other scholars who understand Augustine’s early thought in much the same way include Etienne Gilson,³⁷ Eugene Kevane,³⁸ Augustine J. Curley,³⁹ Mary T.

from Cassiciacum to Confessions, ed. Karla Pollman and Mark Vessey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 141. Mourant, “Augustine and the Academics,” is an admirable essay on the subject; “Augustine and the Academics,” *Recherches augustiniennes* (Paris: 1966).

³² Ibid., chapters 3 and 4.

³³ Most of Madec’s works are in French. Some are “Connaissance de Dieu et action de graces. Essai sur les citations de l’Épître aux Romains, 1, 18-25” *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 2 (1962); *Introduction aux ‘Révisions’ et à la lecture des Œuvres de saint Augustin* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1996); and *Saint Augustin et la philosophie* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1996). One English work is “The Notion of Philosophical Augustinianism: An Attempt at Clarification,” *Mediaevalia* 4 (1978).

³⁴ Carl J. Vaught, *Encounters with God in Augustine’s Confessions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 9-10.

³⁵ Ryan N. S. Topping, *Happiness and Wisdom: Augustine’s Early Theology of Education* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012). Topping explains how Augustine’s goal in the early years was to understand immaterial reality (3), but also had “a distinctive Christian moral theory” (17).

³⁶ Paul R. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

³⁷ Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960).

³⁸ Eugene Kevane, “Christian Philosophy: The Intellectual Side of Augustine’s Conversion,” *Augustinian Studies* 17 (1986).

Clark,⁴⁰ John M. Rist,⁴¹ G. R. Evans,⁴² Joane McWilliams,⁴³ Laura Holt,⁴⁴ Brian Harding,⁴⁵ Ernest Fortin,⁴⁶ Michael P. Foley,⁴⁷ and William Mallard.⁴⁸

One lesson from Harrison is that how we interpret Augustine's early writings is not merely a matter of examining his theology vis-à-vis Neo-Platonism's. There is a methodological difference between Harrison and other scholars arising from the approach they take to Augustine's biography. If we interpret the early Augustine in the usual manner employed by scholars, we will assume that he is a neo-Platonist except where we can demonstrate a difference between him and the relevant Platonic philosopher—usually taken to be Plotinus. If we read Augustine Harrison's way, we will assume that he was always as much of a Christian as he could

³⁹ Curley, *Augustine's Critique of Skepticism*.

⁴⁰ Mary T. Clark, Review of Robert J. O'Connell, *St. Augustine's Early Theory of Man, A. D. 386-391* and *St. Augustine's "Confessions": The Odyssey of Soul*, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 11 (1971).

⁴¹ While suggesting that Augustine realized slowly that Christianity and Plotinus depart on the distinction between creation and creator and the treatment of human beings as both body and soul, Rist notes that Augustine knew "at the outset" that we need God's gracious help to return to him. "Plotinus and Christian Philosophy," *Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 407-408.

⁴² G. R. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Evans takes Augustine's reference in *c. Acad.* to "the one most true philosophical discipline" to refer to Christianity (30) and says that "he wove" neo-Platonic ideas "into his Christian philosophy" (29). Evans also explains how Augustine's ethics in *b. Vita* are Christian and not merely Stoical (151-3).

⁴³ Joane McWilliam, "The Cassiciacum Autobiography," *Studia Patristica*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingston, 14-43; vol. 18.4 (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters Press, 1990).

⁴⁴ Laura Holt, "Wisdom's Teacher: Augustine at Cassiciacum," *Augustinian Studies* 29, no. 2 (1998).

⁴⁵ Brian Harding, "Skepticism, Illumination, and Christianity in Augustine's *Contra Academicos*," *Augustinian Studies* 34, no. 2 (2003).

⁴⁶ Ernest L. Fortin, Review of Robert J. O'Connell's *St. Augustine's Early Theory of Man, A.D. 386-391. The Birth of Philosophic Christianity: Studies in Early Christian and Medieval Thought*, ed. J. Brian Benestad, 309-11. In *Ernest Fortin: Collected Essays*. Vol.1. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996).

⁴⁷ Michael P. Foley, "Cicero, Augustine, and the Philosophical Roots of the Cassiciacum Dialogues," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 45 (1999) and "The Other Happy Life: The Political Dimensions to St. Augustine's Cassiciacum Dialogues," *The Review of Politics* 65, no. 2 (2003).

⁴⁸ Mallard argues that Augustine's early Christology is orthodox, though pre-Chalcedonian; "The Incarnation in Augustine's Conversion," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 15 (1989).

be given his limited understanding of Christian doctrine, and we will accept no commonality with neo-Platonic thought save where we can demonstrate one.

Unlike Alfaric's, this view treats Augustine's conversion as a Christian one. It differs from the Courcelle-O'Connell reading in that young Augustine is considered to be fully a Christian, but *not* fully a neo-Platonist. There is also a difference from Conybeare, for this view does not have it that Augustine simply *rejects* Platonism; he keeps portions of it, subordinating them to Christianity.

V. WHY I FAVOR THE FOURTH VIEW

In this section I shall briefly explain why I favor the fourth view on Augustine's conversion. I find it to be the best synthesis of the elements of the other views, but the real test of a position on Augustine's conversion must be his early writings, which it seems to me support the fourth view.

A. THE FOURTH VIEW AS A SYNTHESIS OF THE OTHERS

In the *Confessions* Augustine memorably remarks that heresies help to clarify true Christian doctrine (Book 7, chapter 19). This is a good general point: Error can be useful by clarifying the truth. I think this is the case with respect to Augustine's conversion and to the amalgamation of Christian and neo-Platonic elements in the early writings. I happen to think that the first three of the positions I have outlined are incorrect; but they illuminate the truth. Each of them expresses some insight which the other do not express fully, if at all. This is one reason I favor the fourth view: It seems to me that it is the best synthesis of the insights of the other views.

The insights which the fourth view synthesizes are these: The idea that Augustine's early worldview contains distinctively Christian elements, as the Conybeare and Courcelle-O'Connell

readings allege. There is also the idea that Augustine's worldview contains neo-Platonic elements, as the Alfarić and Courcelle-O'Connell readings allege. There is also the idea that, as Conybeare says, Augustine's worldview displays a Christian faith which is not subordinated to neo-Platonism.

Each of these key claims of the other views is present in Harrison's view. Accordingly, it is a good synthesis of the insights of the other views.

B. HARRISON'S VIEW AND THE EARLY WRITINGS

However, the real test must be the early writings, especially the Cassiciacum dialogues, wherein these key claims about young Augustine's worldview are all evident. This renders the first three views of his conversion less probable, for none of them recognizes *all* of these claims. Again, the three claims are that neo-Platonic elements are present in young Augustine's worldview, that Christian elements are present, and that the Christian elements are dominant.

The early writings contain neo-Platonic teachings, *contra* the Conybeare reading. There is great praise for Plotinus in *Contra Academicos* 3.18.41. There are numerous references to the Platonic doctrine of immaterial reality, such as *Contra Academicos* 3.17.37, *De beata vita* 1.4, and *De ordine* 1.11.32. Book II of *De ordine* presents the liberal arts as a program for training the mind to know immaterial reality, a path of ascent for the soul on its way up to knowledge of God; this is a Platonic convention at least as old as the writing of Book VII of Plato's *Republic*.

The early writings also contain distinctively Christian elements, *contra* the Alfarić reading. Of particular importance are the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity. There is a clear reference to the Incarnation in *Contra Academicos* 3.19.43: God took on a human body in order to save human beings from their sins. Of the several references to the Trinity, the most visible is Monica's use of a prayer of Ambrose in *De beata vita* 4.35: "Cherish, O Trinity, those

who pray.” Also memorable is Augustine’s tripartite prayer in *Soliloquia* 1.1.1-1.1.3, which contains three sections focusing on the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Courcelle-O’Connell reading is closer to the Harrison reading, and some versions of the two readings may be very close indeed. Nevertheless, there are differences, and I think the Harrison reading is more accurate. In contradistinction to the Courcelle-O’Connell reading, the early writings display a metaphysics which is uniquely Christian and not entirely consistent with neo-Platonism. Ronnie J. Rombs rightly remarks that O’Connell’s legacy has included a “neglect of the context of Augustine’s assimilation of that Plotinian thought. Such Plotinian elements are found in Augustine’s early texts alongside competing or incompatible metaphysical principles.”⁴⁹ As a theist Augustine knows that the Principle governing the universe is a personal God, one who hears our prayers. Moreover, Augustine emphasizes the Son’s equality with the Father in *De ordine* 1.10.29; this Nicene orthodoxy excludes any “Platonizing notions of a hierarchy of divine beings.”⁵⁰ There is also the fundamental metaphysical separation of creator and creation.⁵¹ Etienne Gilson summarizes nicely: “The single fact that Augustine held from the very beginning of his conversion the doctrines of creation and of the equality of the divine Persons would suffice by itself to establish that he was Catholic *and not Plotinian* from the outset.”⁵²

Moreover, in the early writings even the elements in common with neo-Platonism are set in a Christian context and oriented towards Christian purposes. He hopes to use Platonic insights

⁴⁹ Rombs, xxiv.

⁵⁰ Rist, 394-96. Clark emphasizes the significance of this distinction between Christianity and Platonism, which she says even O’Connell acknowledges. Clark, 435.

⁵¹ Kevane and Harrison are particularly helpful in elaborating this metaphysical difference.

⁵² Etienne Gilson, *Revue Philosophique* (1919), 503; quoted in Kevane, 80, n. 99; italics are my own.

to understand the doctrines he received by faith from the church (*Contra Academicos* 3.20.43). Above all, he directs Platonic insights to the goal of understanding two realities with which Christian theology is closely concerned, which Ambrose taught him not to conceive in carnal terms (*De beata vita* 1.4). The true significance for Augustine of what he learned from neo-Platonism is captured in his perfect description of the goal of knowing these two realities: *Deum et animam scire cupio*: “I yearn to know God and the soul” (*Soliloquia* 1.2.7).

VI. CONCLUSION

The differences between these four ways of understanding Augustine’s conversion and the nature of the early writings can be explained with reference to the role Platonism played in that conversion. According to the first, neo-Platonism was the substance of the conversion; Christianity was not. According to the second, Christianity was the substance of the conversion, for which neo-Platonism was a foil. According to the third view, neo-Platonism and Christianity were *both* the substance of the conversion. Neo-Platonism according to the fourth view was a source of insights regarding the true substance of the conversion, Jesus Christ and the Christian church. Although the literature does not currently display a clear consensus, a significant majority of scholars fall somewhere between the third and fourth views. The fourth, it seems to me, is the correct one in light of its superior synthesis of the insights of other views and the degree to which it fits the testimony of the Cassiciacum dialogues.

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