

Augustine's Intricate Relationship with Platonism:

A Study of *The Confessions* and Books VIII and X of *The City of God*

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Saint Augustine of Hippo dealt with Platonism, and its ensuing philosophical ideas, by incorporating it into his Christianity, a fairly common practice among the early church fathers. However, not only did Augustine incorporate and utilize Platonic ideas into his theology, but it was his study of Platonism that led to his conversion to Christianity. Augustine believed that the tenets of Platonism and Christianity were compatible, as the one led him, quite naturally he contended, to conversion to the other. However, he writes of Platonism differently in his works. In *The Confessions*, Augustine speaks of how the ideas of Platonism led him to a more Christian outlook, and provided answers that he had been seeking through his life, as he felt unfulfilled by his past notions of Manicheanism. Platonism spoke of Truth, of a higher plane, of evil as the absence of something, instead of a merely equal physical force, acting on the good with the same amount of intensity. Augustine's search for truth, for purpose, and for direction, according to *The Confessions*, led him straight to Platonism and from there to Christianity.

However, when Augustine writes of Platonism in *The City of God*, specifically in books VIII and X, he has a different goal in mind: instead of seeking to explain why Platonism provides an answer to the questions of life, pointing ultimately to the saving grace, the Truth as Augustine saw it, Christianity, he must instead defend Christianity as a feasible way of life against the contentions and arguments of the Platonists and their contemporaries.

Historically, Augustine was responding to accusations made against Christianity after the fall of the Roman Empire. After the Emperor Constantine made Christianity legal in the Roman Empire through the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, emperors tolerated or even adopted Christianity as their own, until the Emperor Theodosius I made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire through the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 AD. However, Christianity is cited as one of the many factors, some contend the leading factor, that contributed to the fall of the Roman

Empire. By sanctioning a religion that is monotheistic, the emperor weakened his own power by declaring himself no longer to have divine status, which was the status held by emperors throughout the Roman Empire's history with polytheism. In addition to weakening his own power, the empire split upon religious differences. The western Empire spoke Latin and was Roman Catholic, while the eastern Empire spoke Greek. Along with economic, political, and military difficulties, the influence of Christianity was claimed to have had a negative effect on the Roman Empire, and many contended that it led to the Empire's decline. Pagans claim that by taking away the emperor's status as a god, he weakened himself in the eyes of his people and by stopping the worship and sacrifices to honor the pantheon of gods, the Roman Empire brought inevitable destruction upon itself.

Augustine took it upon himself, as the bishop of Hippo and a renowned theologian and writer, to defend Christianity against such accusations and provide reasons as to why the practice of Christianity was a sustainable religion for an Empire or peoples. Augustine envisions and argues for what a people embracing Christianity and thriving, both individually and as a society, would look like and what beliefs they would hold, in his work *The City of God*. However, for the purposes of analyzing his argument regarding Platonism, Books VIII and X are of primary concern. In Book VIII, Augustine seeks to argue "whether the worship of the gods of the natural theology is of any avail towards securing blessedness in the life to come," which he specifically discusses with the Platonists, in reference to the Platonic system of "Facile Princeps," which he regards as the "nearest approximation to Christian truth."¹ In essence, Augustine seeks to refute an idea put forth by Apuleius and his assenters, who believe that demons should be worshipped

¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, Inc., 1950), 243.

in light of being messengers and mediators between the gods and men. Augustine refutes this by maintaining that men cannot be reconciled to *good gods* (of which Augustine believes there is but one, supremely good God) by demons, “who are the slaves of vice” and so cannot facilitate goodness and connection to a benevolent deity.

Augustine begins his series of arguments with Socrates, of whom Plato is a disciple. Socrates was concerned with what would allow humans to obtain a blessed life. Socrates argued that one was truly blessed when all of one’s thoughts and endeavors were focused on achieving and meditating on the chief good (*summum bonum*).² However, the issue, for Augustine, arises in the notion that the “highest good” appears to be subjective, as it is not decidedly given by Socrates or Plato as to what the highest good implies, other than perhaps meditation on the forms. Augustine concedes that neither Socrates, nor his disciple Plato, definitely say their opinions, and therefore “we must, nevertheless, insert into our work certain of those opinions which he expresses in his writings, whether he himself uttered them, or narrates them as expressed by others, and seems himself to approve of – opinions sometimes favourable to the true religion [Christianity], which our faith takes up and defends... as it relates to the truly blessed life which is to be after death.”³ Augustine acknowledges that Socrates and Plato intentionally seek to isolate their opinions and subjective notions and instead prioritize the search for an objective, unchanging truth, which they do not explicitly articulate, aside from advocating for “the highest good.” Augustine takes the notions that Plato appears to be endorsing, focusing on those that seem to point to a true religion as the chief good. By declaring that the blessed life consists on achieving (as far as possible) the chief good and meditating on the chief good,

² *Ibid.*, 246.

³ Augustine, *The City of God*, 248.

Socrates, and in turn Plato, pave the way for a “true religion” to emerge when striving for the blessed life. This is possible because if God is argued to be the chief good, then what is necessary, following Socrates’ and Plato’s logic, is to strive to emulate God and to meditate on God in order to lead a blessed life.

Although it appears that Augustine is promoting Platonism, focusing on the aspects which most align with Christianity, Augustine does so, ultimately, to promote Platonism as the philosophy that most deserves to be considered with seriousness, as Augustine believes Platonists are asking the “right” questions and seeking the truth. Yet they do not *have* the complete truth as Augustine sees it, for they only center on the right questions and concepts and do not come to the conclusion that God is the chief good, who is to be emulated and meditated upon in order to achieve a blessed life. However, even if they fall short in their philosophy, Augustine contends that they are the closest to the truth. In light of this, Augustine declares, “that it is especially with the Platonists that we must carry on our disputations on matters of theology, their opinions being preferable to those of all other philosophers.”⁴ He declares that the Platonists align most with the Christians, and so it is with them that they must see where they meet and, alternatively and importantly, where and *why* they diverge.

Beginning with Augustine’s arguments in Book VIII, Augustine takes on a notion of the physical world and discusses at length why this is important regarding the distinction of Platonists and Christians. He again states, “let all those philosophers, then, give place, as we have said, to the Platonists, and those also who have been ashamed to say that God is a body, but yet have thought that our souls are of the same nature as God.”⁵ Yet Augustine raises the

⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, 250.

objection that there is a great changeableness of the soul, which he thinks implies that it cannot be the same as the divine nature, which is to be unchangeable: “that which can be changed by the body cannot properly be said to be immutable.”⁶ In this, Augustine is specifically speaking to those philosophers like the Stoics and Manicheans, who claim the divine nature is in the physical. For physical sacredness is upheld by the notion that humans contain deities or have souls that are god-like. Their very being, even their body, being of a divine nature, is therefore sacred. This is only allowable when one accepts a polytheistic religion, as even though Christianity will agree that humans are made in the *image* of God, they are not of the same nature as God and it is considered heretical to assign oneself as a god and therefore to count as sacred the physical. Taking this distinction into account, Augustine is seeking to refute the idea of a physical sacredness or polytheism and focus more on the spiritual, unchanging deity as promoted by the Platonists and the Christians.

Augustine applies the central ideas of Platonism to Christian principles, advocating that instead of faith as opposed to reason, Christianity offers a reasonable faith. This is opposed to what he argues in his *Confessions*, as Augustine is originally repelled from Christianity from the very fact that it *does* require an element of faith. This is an instance where he speaks of Christianity and Platonism in different terms than previously, in order to better contend with the negative claims of the pagan Platonists. Therefore, in *City of God* Augustine seeks to show how reasonable Christianity is in order to promote its proper standing as the one true religion that ought to be practiced by man. Augustine takes on the Platonist idea of forms in order to make a

⁶ Ibid.

claim about what, or who, is the first form. So, when Augustine writes of the forms, he likens the first form, the chief good, to God.

Able men, who have thought deeply on these things, have gathered that the first form is not to be found in those things whose form is changeable... they saw that there is some existence in which is the first form, unchangeable, and therefore not admitting of degrees if comparison, and in that they most rightly believed was the first principle of things, which was not made, and by which all things were made.⁷

Here, Augustine likens the Christian values of an unchanging, perfect God, to that of the unchanging Forms conceived of in Platonism. Augustine holds with the belief that the Platonists were closest to the Christian Truth. For not only did they rightly conceive of a chief good and unchanging Form, but they “are to be held as excelling other philosophers in logic.”⁸ This is because “those, however, whom we [Christians] conceived by the mind from justly rank before all others, have distinguished those things which are conceived by the mind from those which are perceived by the senses, neither taking away from the senses anything to which they are competent, nor attributing to them anything beyond their competency.”⁹ Therefore Augustine contends that it is the Platonists who have rightly attributed all that can be called logic or rational philosophy and isolated it from that which is merely sensational or subjective, in an effort to divine that which is objective, true, and rational. He highlights the “truth” of the Platonists against the misconceived notions held by such philosophical ideologies as those held by the Epicureans or the Stoics. He declares that the Epicureans and Stoics either attributed too much rationality to things perceived through the senses, or else they applied logic too liberally in conceiving of objective truth. It is the Platonists who align most closely with Christian doctrine, who understand that while sensation and subjectivity contribute to logic, sensations must be

⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁹ Augustine, *The City of God*, 252.

evaluated objectively against the known objective “truth” in order to be called logical. In understanding this, Augustine goes so far as to claim that by the light of Christian understanding, the Platonists “have affirmed [the rational] to be that selfsame God by whom all things were made.”¹⁰ However, it is important to note that while Augustine gives the Platonists the honor of being excellent, achieving the highest truth in their philosophical ideology, they still miss the complete truth, as they do not adhere to Christian principles. In the end, they rationally come to a proper understanding of the physical, moral, and the rational, but they fail to perceive of what the chief good and the highest Form consists. They understand that physical sacredness is not to be promoted, in that human nature is changing and therefore not perfect, nor do they think that everything perceived by the senses is infallible truth. In this way, they have a proper understanding of the physical, in not raising it to a deity, nor do they believe that the physical must be exactly as perceived by human sensation. By recognizing that morality and the blessed life are found in emulating and mediating upon the highest good, Platonists have a proper notion of how to achieve morality and from whom morality comes, in that it is found in the chief good. Finally, what is considered rational is that which is universal and unchanging, and so the rational comes from the forms and from the chief good. The forms are the true element and the physical world is but an imperfect image of these. In this way, the physical is put in its proper place, as only what is perfect, universal, unchanging, and necessary is considered rational and moral. However, the Platonists fall short because even though they put these things in their proper place, they fail to perceive that this chief good that they conceive of and seek to emulate and meditate upon is God.

¹⁰ Ibid.

After outlining the reasoning as to why it is most proper for the Christians to consider most seriously and respond to the Platonists, Augustine proceeds to build his argument as to why, even though they have conceived of a philosophy closest to Christian truth, they fall short of having the “full” Truth. This is because Platonism stops at making explicit what this highest or chief good is, leaving a central tenet up for debate and in a subjective form. This is less a failure of reason and philosophy than it is a failure of faith. The Platonists are to be respected because they logically structured their philosophy quite properly, reasoning out a proper understanding of the physical, moral, and rational. However, at a certain point a claim has to be made about the forms and what the chief good is, even if one cannot point to a physical manifestation of it. Because the forms and the chief good are what is True, but what is found on earth are only fractured images of these things, it ultimately becomes necessary to make claims about what these True things are and of what they consist. Platonists do not go as far as to make these claims, stopping at the argument that there *are* forms and a chief good that make up the highest truth, for which ourselves and our physical world are but a poor likeness. Christianity and faith therefore go a step further, providing what philosophy and reason cannot: they make explicit what are these amorphous (for the physical world) forms. By not acknowledging exactly of what the chief good consists, Platonists allow themselves to fall into the heresy of polytheism. For “even the Platonists, though they say these things [that Augustine outlines previously] concerning the one true God, nevertheless thought that sacred rites were to be performed in honour of many gods.¹¹ While Augustine defends the notion that Platonists are superior to other philosophers, they err on a large point of Christian truth: while one may be blessed by focusing

¹¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, 257.

on the chief good, the sacred rites that lead to blessedness ought to be performed only to the one, true unchanging God of Christianity as opposed to a pantheon of gods such as those of the Roman Empire. Augustine argues that the Platonists had this true knowledge of a chief good because “that which is known of God has been manifested among them.”¹² Augustine proposes the idea that Platonists align so closely with Christians because the Truth of God has been manifested in Plato and his disciples. However, they fall short on conceiving of the whole truth of God, as ultimately, they cling to the commonly held belief of polytheism instead of fully understanding the Truth of the one form, the highest good: God. This is allowed to be so because if one conceives of the forms as Truth, and there are multitudes of forms, then it is possible to have lesser gods, a sort of mediator between the chief good and humans as lesser beings. By not holding with the notion that the chief good is the only good to be worshipped and emulated, as the Christians do, the Platonist ideas allow for a multitude of gods (in the guise of forms and mediators) without contradicting the idea of one true god as the chief good.

Augustine delves into the issues arising from prominent Platonist philosophers. Apuleius likened demons to men and even went so far as to advocate for demons as mediators between gods and men. Augustine balks at this, declaring that raising demons to the level above men and just below gods, as beings worthy of worship, as benevolent mediators, is a false doctrine. He declares that even if they had attributes in common with the gods, they would not be worthy of worship. “Even if that case [if they had benevolent, god-like virtues] it would not have been our duty to worship them like God on account of these things, but rather to worship Him from whom we know they had received them.”¹³ Augustine has gone through Apuleius’ claims of demons as

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 263.

close to gods, refuting each notion that they should be regarded as benevolent mediators, perhaps even worthy of worship.

However, even if Apuleius' claims have some validity as to the personality and virtues of demons, it is necessary to recognize the chief good, the source of all good. Things like objects, people, and demons are not to be worshipped. Augustine is speaking against polytheistic and pantheist notions of worship, advocating that there is only one true Good from which all other things are just a reflection of the form, the chief good. It is a mistake to take in the transitory, broken, changeable, fallen things of this world, or even demons not of this world, and worship them as if they were the good. Plato realizes that the good is not to be found in the physical world, in sensation. Instead, he points to the forms as something to be meditated on by the wise men. All this is not in conflict with Christian doctrine. The problem arises with the Platonic notion of gods or demons. Even though Plato does not specifically speak of gods in his works, the possibility for lesser gods, or demon mediators, is not done away with, as the forms, which are multitudinous, could allow for multiple gods and forms, which take their form from the first form or the chief good. The idea of polytheism therefore is compatible with Platonism, as like polytheism, the chief god could be like Zeus, while the lesser forms are lesser gods of the pantheon. While Platonism allows for polytheistic practices, Augustine argues for a monotheistic notion of God as the one, unchanging, chief good.

Augustine seeks to undermine polytheism by declaring that the pantheon of gods is more like men than an unchanging, benevolent highest good, worthy of worship and contemplation. Augustine cites Hermes, as he declares, "our forefathers erred very far with respect to the

knowledge of the gods... they invented this art of making gods.”¹⁴ Gods made by men are not simply fictitious for Augustine, but actually demons. Augustine declares there is danger in the polytheistic belief held by some of the Platonists. Whereas before he praised the insights of Platonic ideas, now it becomes necessary to point out the flaws where the ideas of the Platonists diverge from the theology of Christianity. Christianity holds the rational truth, following the logic of the Platonists themselves, Augustine argues. If there is a chief good upon which the wise man must meditate, strive for, and worship, then one creates a false idol if one makes many objects worthy of being the chief good. “Chief” implies that there is a highest good, and all others are but an image, an imitation of the highest good. Augustine declares that the chief good is God, who alone is worthy to be worshipped, meditated upon, and sought after by wise men. For one should not “settle” for worshipping lesser beings and forms if they all point to the chief good, as Plato himself even advocates that the blessed life is found in emulating and meditating upon the *chief* good, not merely the forms and certainly not the things of this world, such as the polytheistic belief in the sacred physical.

Therefore, it is not that Christianity is unsustainable, or irrational, or dangerous. The Platonists are widely respected, followed, and referenced in philosophical works. Augustine agrees that the Platonists are, of all the philosophers, the closest to the truth and the worthiest of consideration. However, the old polytheistic beliefs of the Roman Empire are false, and on those grounds alone should be abolished. Platonism allows for polytheism and many well-known and respected Platonist philosophers were pagans. Augustine, though acknowledging that among the philosophy’s Platonism contains the most truth, he claims that it is ultimately Christianity which

¹⁴ Augustine, *The City of God*, 272.

provides a rational logic of belief, as the theology aligns with Platonist rationalism and follows it to its most logical conclusion with *one* God as the chief good. Platonism therefore contains the truest knowledge among the philosophies, but it falls short of the complete truth because for Augustine, the complete truth requires faith in God as the chief good.

The argument that Christianity brought on the fall of the Roman Empire is one which Augustine seeks to refute in his work *The City of God*. First of all, as outlined previously, the tenets of Christianity are *right*, to Augustine's line of thinking, and so if they are objectively right it is foolish to believe that by following proper principles one could be led astray into destruction or that it would be wiser to adopt a different course of action. So, when the Roman Empire adopts Christianity as the official religion of the Empire, it cannot logically be the wrong decision. Therefore, by following the proper, rational beliefs of Christian doctrine, it could only help, not hurt, the empire. For justice can only truly be found if the people ultimately give what is right and just: worship and devotion to the true God. For if there is a chief good, from whom all truth is found and who is universal, unchanging, and necessary, then it follows that the most proper and wise course of action is to seek to emulate, meditate upon, and worship the chief good, as Plato declares is the way to a blessed life. It is not therefore right and just to not follow the truth as defined by Christianity, which lays claim to knowledge of the one true God, the chief good, and so it follows that the only just city, and the only city that is working upon proper true principles is a city made up of citizens devoted to God.

Augustine makes a strong distinction between what a city of God would look like and what a city of man does. It is important to note that when Augustine writes of a city of God and a city of man, he does not imagine actual geographical locations, the way one normally thinks of cities. Instead, he imagines that everyone chooses to be a citizen of one or the other, regardless

of geographical location. The city of God finds its citizens in those devout Christians who truly seek to worship and serve God. By following the proper principles and truths Augustine contends are only found in Christianity, people can become citizens of the city of God, which reflects heaven on earth. In contrast, those citizens who align more closely to the principles of the city of man find themselves living their life on erroneous principles, worshipping false gods, and seeking their self-pleasure over and above the objective good. Most cities found on this earth are made up of citizens of the city of man, built upon erroneous principles and therefore doomed to fall. A city cannot be founded on sound principles if they do not derive their truth from the highest truth, God. A city cannot be just unless they give themselves to the worship that is rightly due to God, who as a perfect being from whom all blessings flow, is the only one truly worthy of worship by mankind. However, it cannot be assumed, especially after Rome made Christianity the official religion of the empire, that it is easy to see which citizens belong to which "city." On the contrary, it does not follow that simply because one becomes a member of the Church that one is truly a citizen of the City of God. There may be many reasons for joining the Church which do not follow that one agrees to its central tenets and seeks to worship whom they believe to be the one true God. One could join for political gain, societal pressures, or a false sense of piety. One may nominally align oneself with the Christian religion and not actively seek to become a true follower, one who brings heaven to earth, such as the true citizens of the City of God do. The main difference is that the citizens of the City of God choose the *eternal* over the temporal, whereas those of the City of Man choose the *temporal* over the eternal.

Augustine thus outlines a city of man, among whose citizens much of the Roman Empire was, and which all cities based on erroneous philosophical principles are, and compares it to the

City of God, which contains the ideal citizens who follow sound Christian principles. Citizens from both cities must deal with the temporal world. The emphasis is on the difference in how they regard temporal things. Citizens of the City of Man see the temporal as an end in itself, while citizens of the City of God see the temporal only as a means because that which is eternal is always above the temporal and so eternal things are the end, with temporal things the means. Following these dichotomies between citizens, it is only through those citizens of the City of God that Rome is saved from complete destruction, as he contends it was brought to its knees because of internal moral decay.¹⁵ Augustine outlines the role of the church, the state, the City of God and the City of Man. The church is divinely established and as such, takes on the role of leading humans to eternal truth and the chief good (God). A properly constructed state would adhere to the virtues of politics and of the mind, prompting a virtuous citizenry. These, when properly serving in their roles, are a visible sign of the good. The *invisible* roles, those of the City of God and the City of Man, are made up of those people who are predestined for salvation (the City of God) and those who choose eternal damnation (the City of Man). From here Augustine is able to further outline his notion of justice, which comes from rightfully giving of things necessary for life, and aligning oneself in such a way that society seeks to be made up of a citizenry of the City of God, bringing heaven to earth, therefore bringing their virtues to political life and earthly society. Augustine puts forth the argument that God's plan for history is, ultimately, to show the fulfillment of God's plan, which is to foster the City of God through its holy citizens. Given this grand trajectory of history, Augustine questions what the fall of Rome even means in the grand scheme of things, when it is not the earthly physical establishments that

¹⁵ See Augustine, *The City of God*, Books I & II

matter, but the people within those establishments and their immortal souls. Therefore, the most essential understanding of citizenship for Augustine cannot come from a geographical base or man-made empires, but through one's choice to act as a citizen of the spiritual "cities:" the City of God and the City of Man, which choices will stand for eternity.

Given that this is Augustine's view of history, even if some tenets of Christianity, like those against the worship of people, even the emperor, may have weakened the power of the ruling body, it is not the city made by man that matters, in the end, even if it is a "city" as significant as the Roman Empire. All man-made empires, even the strongest, oldest, most capable empires, will fall. They are not universal, unchanging, and necessary. The only city choices that matter are which one aligns themselves with for eternity: the City of God or of Man, which are the only ones that last, while the temporal must at some point fall. Given that only these cities have an eternal significance, the important thing is for learned men to wisely follow the tenets of Christianity so as to become subjects of the City of God. While a City of Man aligns itself with cultures and values across the temporal world, as many peoples base their foundation on erroneous principles and not on Christianity, even an empire which adopts Christianity is not guaranteed to be a city of God, as Augustine defines it, for that is a choice of each individual soul and not an empire. This is because all physical and man-made things are but the reflection of the true forms and the first form, the chief good, God. While it is wise and beneficial to build a city aiming to act as a City of God, trying to fill its citizens with the proper notions found in the church and state, ultimately it is the innermost choice of each man that prevails. Therefore, it does not follow that by adopting Christianity the Roman Empire was doomed to fall, but rather that *all* man-made empires, no matter how strong or sacred, will pass away. Augustine therefore dismisses these accusations that Christianity was a main factor in the

fall of Rome and decides to focus on what he thinks is truly necessary to understand: that which is true. After divining what is true, then wise men can seek to create a heaven on earth, a temporal City of God which encourages its subjects to strive for the chief good, so as to usher them into the eternal City, the truest embodiment of the City of God, when their earthly life has ended. However, a city cannot make the eternal choice of citizenship for its subjects. So, the fall of Rome was of its own making because it was already morally corrupt, and many of its citizens clung to the pagan faith of the past instead of truly embracing Christianity. For Augustine, all physical, man-made cities and empires are bound to fall, for they are not eternal. At best they can promote the values of the city of God, to encourage their subjects to align themselves to the eternal City of God, striving to live the truth that Christianity entails. Therefore, the fall of Rome was inevitable because earthly cities are but transient likenesses of the eternal cities of God and Man. Even if Rome had now adopted what Augustine considered the true religion, and so now had its basis in sound principles, it is still man-made and not all of its people were united in justly following the true God. Therefore, the fall of Rome, while inevitable in any case, was hastened not by the adoption of Christianity, for Christianity provided true principles for the city, but rather for the lingering beliefs in false doctrines, like those held by the pagan Platonists, that still were to be found in the Roman Empire. That is why Augustine focuses on Platonism and must contrast it to Christianity, as Platonism and its teachings, which are highly influential in the Roman Empire,¹⁶ fall in with paganism and a direct people toward the choice of the City of Man, as opposed to Christianity with its focus on becoming citizens of the City of God.

¹⁶ See Augustine, *The City of God*, Bk. VIII, Ch. 10: "We have thought it better to plead our cause with the Platonists, because their writings are better known."

In Book X of *The City of God*, Augustine deals further with the Platonists and their philosophical outlook. Chapter by chapter, he deals with specific Platonist philosophers, pointing out where they differ from Christian doctrine and why the Christian perspective is the “true” one. In chapter one of book X Augustine specifically focuses on a particular Platonist, Porphyry, and his notions about the principle and the way of the soul’s cleansing and deliverance. Porphyry was a Platonist philosopher, who studied with Plotinus in Rome from 263-269 AD, and was a follower of Plotinus’ version of Platonism, Neoplatonism. Porphyry sought to apply Platonism to pagan religion so as to elevate it to a more rational sphere.¹⁷ The specific idea that Augustine takes on is the Neoplatonic notion of demons and worshipping beings other than the source of goodness, God. Even if the spirits are benevolent, would they wish sacrifices to be offered on their behalf or only to the one God. Christians advocate that though there are spirits and men who enjoy the blessing and favor of God, they are not themselves to be worshipped. Martyrs, saints, and angels are benevolent spirits and men, but never is it proper to offer sacrifices to them. Even accepting that there are good men and spirits from whom we enjoy happiness and revere, yet this does not make them worthy of worship. For “whoever these immortal and blessed inhabitants of heaven be, if they do not love us, and wish us to be blessed, then we ought not to worship them; and if they do love us and desire our happiness, they cannot wish us to be made happy by any other means than they themselves have enjoyed, — for how could they wish our blessedness to flow from one source, theirs from another?”¹⁸ Where Porphyry would argue that the benevolent spirits are to receive that divine honor which is rendered by sacrifice, “λατρεία,” Augustine declares that “λατρεία” is due only to

¹⁷ Eyjólfur Emilsson, “Porphyry,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 10 June 2015, plato.stanford.edu/entries/porphyry/.

¹⁸ Augustine, *The City of God*, Bk. X, Ch.1.

the chief good, of which all other goodness is but a lower reflection of the true form. For how, logically, could man hope to be made truly happy by a source different than that from which all happiness flows? The blessed spirits are happy because of God and so they, in their turn, can only point man to their source of happiness, the chief good, God. It would be a lesser, fractured happiness that could be derived from the benevolent spirits such as Porphyry claims they have the power to give.

However, even in *The City of God*, where Augustine sets out to make a distinction between Platonism and Christianity, he cannot help but pay homage to the intelligence and truth to be found in Platonic thought. For with chapter two, he praises the Platonist Plotinus in his opinion regarding “enlightenment from above.”¹⁹ Plotinus, as opposed to Porphyry, holds with the notion that “these spirits have the same source of happiness as ourselves... and enjoy perfect happiness in the participation of God.”²⁰ Even acknowledging that the soul referred to is more a soul of the world, an intellectual soul, which is what the Platonists contends lives on after the material body has died, Augustine aligns the Christian idea of the soul with this intellectual soul. For what both are speaking of is a soul that outlives the body and is among the “blessed immortals who inhabit heaven.”²¹ These spirits derive their blessed life and truth from the source, the selfsame source from whom all intelligent souls may derive their blessed life and truth. For “these heavenly spirits derive their blessed life, and the light of truth from their blessed life, and the light of truth, the source as ourselves.”²² Therefore, conceding the

¹⁹ Ibid., Bk. X, Ch. 2.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

superiority of the Platonists yet again, Augustine contends that Plotinus is right regarding the source of Enlightenment coming from above.

After reiterating in chapters three and four that though the Platonists have the right idea about the source of happiness, they have erred in who deserves honor and sacrifice, as such as this should only be given to the one God. Augustine must emphasize that Christians believe that though these sacrifices should properly be given to God, God does not *need* these things, but they are justly due to Him and serve to bring happiness upon the one who so delights to give it. Justice enters into the point because *religio* and justice are interconnected for Augustine. According to his political theology, justice is directly in relationship with the theology of love. What man loves affects how justice is dispensed in society, for how one loves oneself, one's God, and others will inform his idea of justice. Thus, it is necessary for one to be informed on how to properly love God and love neighbor, the commandments that comprise the Law. For love has a role in dispensing justice and there can be not true justice if one's personal justice is misaligned with the truth, for it will be reflected by societal and political notions of justice.²³ Sacrifice becomes essential to a love for God. The importance of the sacrifice is not in the material sacrifice itself. For it is but a symbol pointing wise men toward the true sacrifice asked for by God: that is, a contrite heart. Augustine clarifies that "all the divine ordinances, therefore, which we read concerning the sacrifices in the service of the tabernacle or the temple, we are to refer to the love of God and our neighbor."²⁴ Therefore, unlike the notion of sacrifice to lesser spirits and the pantheon of gods, the Christian notion of sacrifice is to help the person and not to benefit the deity and its importance is in the intention behind the sacrifice and not the material

²³ Paul Krause, "Augustine on Love, Justice, and Pluralism in Human Nature," *Voegel in View*, 9 Dec. 2018, voegelinview.com/Augustine-on-love-justice-and-pluralism-in-human-nature/.

²⁴ Augustine, *The City of God*, Bk. X, Ch. 5.

sacrifice itself. This is a departure from the general, polytheistic way of the Roman gods, for whom sacrifice is necessary for the deity's sake and the material of the sacrifice is of vital importance. In this way, Augustine is leading up to his conclusion that the heretical, false beliefs held by the Romans are what lead to the degeneration and fall of the Empire and not, as some tried to argue, with the adoption of Christian doctrine.

While Augustine argues against Platonism in *The City of God*, specifically the Neoplatonists who sought to assign Platonist philosophy to pagan religion in order to elevate pagan religion to pagan philosophy, in his earlier work *The Confessions*, Augustine champions Platonism for bringing him to the Christian faith. Throughout his life, Augustine has sings that point him to Christianity. He writes of Cicero, and how since his writings contained Truth, it was the truth of God, though the name of the Lord did not appear in Cicero's writings. For Cicero's book *Hortensius* "changed [his]affections. It turned [his] prayers to you, Lord, and caused [him] to have different purposes and desires."²⁵ Cicero, though not a Christian, had within his philosophy and his works truths, and Augustine writes on how truth is objective and from God, so the truths found in his work were of God. In declaring that the book changed his affections, it was his passions that were curbed. While young, Augustine let his passions rule, stealing and reveling in lust.²⁶ This change occurred because Cicero inspired Augustine to a search for "undying wisdom."²⁷ Augustine praises Cicero and his works, not only for his mind but for that which is greater, his heart. For his heart sought undying wisdom and warned against any who would lead one astray. However, it could not bring Augustine to what he later regarded as the fullness of knowledge, the knowledge of Christianity, for "this checked [him], that

²⁵ Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Random House, LLC, 1960), 39.

²⁶ See Augustine, *The Confessions*, Books I and II.

²⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 39.

Christ's name was not in it... whatever lacked this name, no matter how learned and polished and veracious it was, could not wholly capture me."²⁸ He credits this to his mother Monica's teaching and zeal for Christianity, in that even when he was not a believer there was that in him that could not regard as fully Christian, with knowledge of Jesus as Savior, could not have within it the full undying truth. However, when he turns in the next chapter to the "Sacred Scripture" he is disgusted. This is because where Cicero speaks in an elevated and dignified manner, Augustine saw the Scriptures as written in too humble a style, which seemed "unworthy of comparison with the nobility of Cicero's writings."²⁹ So, disgusted by the "plainness" of Scripture and impressed by Cicero's oratory and dignified writing style, Augustine turns away from the Scriptures and instead finds himself drawn to the Manicheans.

The Manicheans spoke of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, but "were only the tongue's sound and datter, while their hearts were empty of truth."³⁰ The Manicheans claimed to have the truth about the world, presenting a dualism: many things of the flesh, earthly things, are evil and to be scorned. Whereas the things of the spirit, higher physical things like light, and the immaterial, are to be sought after. Being a type of Gnosticism, it "offered salvation through special knowledge (gnosis) of spiritual truth."³¹ The soul shares in the nature of God, but it has fallen and is now encompassed by the evil earthly things. One must recover one's "true self" transcending the "evil" earthly, base world. Although for a time this worldview satisfied Augustine, he later views it as unsatisfactory, as "you [God] did not taste in my mouth as you are in truth – for you were not those empty figments – nor did I receive nourishment from them, but

²⁸ Ibid., 40.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 41.

³¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Manichaeism," accessed April 27, 2020, www.britannica.com/topic/Manichaeism.

rather I myself was exhausted by them.”³² Augustine cannot find true fulfillment in Manicheanism for the same reason he could not find it in the works of Cicero: they did not have the truth of Jesus as savior and Lord. This heretical dualism led men to believe that they were of God and to shun the material, which is the very creation of God, and is good. For God is “not those bodies. Nor are you the soul, which is the life of bodies, and therefore the life of bodies is better and more certain than the bodies. But you are the life of souls, the life of lives, living yourself, and you, O life of my soul, are never changed!”³³ It is not that people must detach themselves from the material world and learn to hate their bodies and the things of this earth. Rather, they are to be put in their proper respective in regard to Christian theology, where the body and the material world find their worth in God, their creator.

The other fallacy of Manicheanism that Augustine ultimately comes to reject is that of evil as an entity in itself. For, in Augustine’s own words, “evil is only the privation of a good, even to the point of complete nonentity.”³⁴ Evil is not found in strictly material things, for evil is not of God, and the material and all the things of the earth are God’s creation. Rather, it is through a thwarting of God’s works and will that evil can come into the equation, for evil is not a thing of itself, nor can it create, for creation is of the divine. The only course of action evil can take is a deprivation or twisting of something good, of God. Yet when Augustine speaks of this, he does not have this knowledge because of a critical look at Manicheanism, nor because of Christianity. Indeed, Manicheanism and its fallacies cannot lead him to Christian truth, for it has nothing of the truth in it. Instead, Augustine lays claim to such superior philosophies like Platonism, which are the way that he is led to embraces the full truth as told by Sacred Scripture.

³² Augustine, *The Confessions*, 41.

³³ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁴ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 43.

Augustine claims outright that he believes it was the infallible will of the Almighty God who led him to read and love the philosophy of the Platonists. For it was only through reading the truths found in higher philosophy that he gave up Manicheanism, when so many philosophers took higher rank, for Augustine, above the claims of the Manicheans. Through the intercession of enlightened philosophers and St. Ambrose, Augustine turned away from his belief in Manicheanism. For it is under the influence of St. Ambrose's preaching that he declares, "I doubted everything and wavered in the midst of all things. Yet I resolved that the Manicheans must be abandoned."³⁵ Even though at this point in his life Augustine was not fully convinced of the divinity of Jesus Christ, yet he understood that the problems that he found with Manicheanism, such as the strict dualism and materialism of evil, he was forced to give it up in favor of these more enlightened influences. For he explains, "even in my skeptical period I did not see how I could persist in a sect above which I now placed many philosophers."³⁶ He is specifically alluding to Platonist philosophy, which contained more of what he later came to embrace as truth, than any other philosophy he had yet encountered. Platonism gave Augustine such ideas as immaterial reality, the hierarchical nature of reality, in that evil is unequal and lesser, for evil is a privation, an absence of a natural order. All of these concepts aligned with Augustine's view of the world and provided a better explanation for him than Manicheanism could.

For Augustine, the appeal of Platonism above a wholehearted leap to Christian doctrine was found in its elevated language, much like that of the admired Cicero, and the emphasis on the logical. One is not told that they must just "believe" certain arguments and tenets of

³⁵ Ibid., 93.

³⁶ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 93.

Platonism strictly on faith, without provision of a logical argument and basis. It follows that everything on earth is but an image, a reflection of the forms. These forms are what is true and there is a greatest or chief form. This solves the dualism issue for Augustine, as it is not necessary to shun those things of the earth, the material world. Instead, when put in their proper perspective, the things of this world hold beauty and truth, albeit a lesser form than that of the unseen, the true forms. Platonists speak of “the One,” but do not necessarily go on to define exactly of what the One consists. The One is “beyond being” and so beyond definition: it is eternal and immaterial, it is whole, with no parts. Yet other than those bases, it is indefinable for the Platonists. Harboring an idea of the immaterial world, a natural hierarchy, and the One, Platonism aligns with Augustine and his view of the world best. Without demanding a faith in the unseen, the Platonists lay out a philosophy that aligns with the world as Augustine knew it. Through learned men he was able to untangle the fallacies that had plagued him regarding the Manicheans, and he was greatly interested in the teachings of St. Ambrose, but still not fully committed to the tenets of the Catholic Church, for they demanded that central theological beliefs must be just that, *beliefs* taken on faith, namely, that Jesus rose from the dead and is the Lord.

Augustine elaborates what it was that he learned in the philosophy of the Platonists that he found to be undying wisdom such as he had been seeking for ever since his encounter with Cicero. “After reading those books of the Platonists and being instructed by them to search for incorporeal truth, I clearly saw your invisible things which are understood by the things that are made.”³⁷ The incorporeal truth refers to the forms and most importantly, the chief form: the

³⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 140.

good. Though they have no physical existence, merely incomplete reflections and imitations found in the material world, it is the incorporeal forms that carry the truth and so are worthy of study and devotion. This is considered truth by Augustine, even when he later embraces Christian theology, because this notion of the Platonists of emphasizing the incorporeal is also found in Saint Paul's letter to the Romans: "ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made."³⁸ In this, Paul emphasizes that there is no excuse for idolatry, for the works of the Lord can be seen in all of material creation. This aligns very well with the philosophy held by the Platonists to be true, for it is through the material world that one gains knowledge of the forms, as seen in the infamous argument about "the one over many."³⁹ Plato argues in his dialogues, specifically in *The Republic*, "We customarily hypothesize a single form in connection with each collection of many things to which we apply the same name."⁴⁰ To illustrate his point, there are many triangles found in the material world; the definition of a triangle, "a polygon having three sides,"⁴¹ whose angles add up to 180°, can be found in the material world but its truest definition is begotten from the form. There are many physical examples of a triangle, some fitting the proper definition more closely than others, but the idea of a triangle is fully realized in the One, not the many examples that stem from it. The glory of the Lord is reflected in the multifaceted beauty of his creation, which finds its purest earthly form in human beings, who are made in God's image. They are *not* of the same soul or being as God, however. They are more like an imitation "many," that lead back to the form, especially the

³⁸ Rom. 1:20 (The New American Bible, revised edition; all subsequent citations are from this version).

³⁹ This precise terminology of "the One Over Many" is called such by Aristotle, never Plato himself, however for the sake of argument I shall use this term to refer to Plato's notion of a Form being a "one over many."

⁴⁰ Plato, *Plato's The Republic* (New York: The Modern Library, 1941), 5961a-b.

⁴¹ *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "triangle," accessed April 27, 2020, [merriam-webster.com/dictionary/triangle](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/triangle).

chief form. This is where Platonism again aligns much more closely with Christian teaching than Manicheism. Manicheans make the heretical claim that the person is of God, of the same being, who only are in a fallen state of the sinful physical world and if they can only separate themselves from evil, they can achieve godliness and Paradise.⁴² Platonism does not declare that the things of earth can *be* the immaterial, perfect forms. They only hold with the idea that they point to and resemble the forms. This is in line with Christian doctrine, where humans are *imago Dei*, the image of God, not of God, like Jesus or the Holy Spirit.

Given the underlying truths, the undying wisdom, found in Platonist philosophy, especially regarding the One and the chief good, the highest form, Augustine declares it was an essential steppingstone to his conversion process. For he refers to understanding the wisdom of the Platonists first as a precursor to Christianity as the will of God: “it is for this reason, I believe, that you wished me to come upon those books before I read your Scriptures, so that the way I was affected by them might be stamped upon my memory.”⁴³ Augustine gives the Platonists and their philosophy a lot of credit, for he thinks that as far as any philosophers go, they have gotten the closest to Christian truth with their logic. But, as acknowledged within *The City of God*, it is not a problem of the Platonists, but a limitation of philosophy, that they cannot grasp the full truth that is only found in belief in Christ Jesus as Savior and Lord. Since Augustine ultimately arrives at Christianity, he declares that it is a relief that he encountered the Platonists when he did. For if he had encountered them after the Sacred Scriptures, he might have been lured away from the full truth to a partial truth, since the Platonists align themselves closely with Christian doctrine in certain respects. However, Augustine would conclude this to

⁴² *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “Manichaeism,” accessed April 27, 2020, www.britannica.com/topic/Manichaeism.

⁴³ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 140-141.

be erroneous on the grounds that by accepting Platonism, one trades the whole truth of Christianity for the partial truths of even Enlightened philosophers. Or, upon knowing both Platonist philosophy and Christian theology, one might come to the heretical conclusion that from Platonism one could receive the full truth that can only be realized in the Christian theology of faith. Platonism, while practically leading Augustine to Christianity with its logical reasoning about the world and the things of the immaterial, fails to define its most important teaching: of what the One, the chief good, truly consists. The Platonists decide that the One, as they conceive it, is “beyond being” and beyond definition. This is where Christian theology must step in and offer the One as God. By encountering Platonism and then Christianity, Augustine is “able to detect and distinguish how great a difference lies between presumption and contrition, and between those who see where they must travel, but do not see the way, and those who see the way that leads not only to beholding our blessed fatherland but also dwelling therein.”⁴⁴ Platonist philosophers provide many of the truths that align with Christian theology. However, after getting so far in their logic, they stop at the most important conclusion, which Christian theology embraces. For although they see that there are forms, that they are immaterial, that the world is a reflection of these perfect forms and that the good, is to be thought upon and deserving of devotion, they fail to perceive of what the chief good consists. The one true God of Christianity, the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who brings all God’s people into communion with him, who unites the physical and the immaterial, is not conceived of or acknowledged by Platonism. Platonism provides a wonderful framework, but to Augustine’s mind, it does not go nearly far enough in its conclusions.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 141.

Although Augustine was technically introduced to Christianity first, as his mother was a devout Catholic, he did not embrace the religion nor greatly study the Sacred Scriptures until after he had studied Cicero and received his burning passion for undying wisdom, which led to practicing Manicheanism, which gave way to the “superior” Platonist philosophy, only to lead to the most fulfilling truth: Christianity. In this way, Christianity is the last thing that Augustine truly learns and embraces. Through many pitfalls, errors, studies, and passions, it is the faith of his mother, the truth he was taught in the cradle, that Augustine fully embraces after his many influences in life. Augustine contends that he had to move from Manicheanism to Platonism to Christianity, and could not have gone in any other order, because not only could he have been swayed from the truth of the scriptures by the apparent soundness of Platonist philosophy, but he did not see that Christianity must supersede Manicheanism. After hearing St. Ambrose, Augustine is impressed by the man’s heart as well as his mind. He is kindly to Augustine, and so Augustine feels warmly toward him and listens with interest and respect to his theological discussions and sermons. However, though Christianity has such rational and staunch defenders, it did not divert him from the path of Manicheanism that he was on. Augustine explains that, “Yet for all that I did not think that the Catholic way must be held to by myself even though it could have its learned defenders who would fully and not absurdly refute objections made to it. Nor did I think that what I had previously held was to be condemned, for both parties seemed to be equal in their defenses.”⁴⁵ Even hearing the rationality and defensibility of the Sacred Scriptures and Christianity from a future saint was not enough to cause Augustine to abandon his notion of Manicheanism. He still struggled with the “problem of evil” and had great hesitation

⁴⁵ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 92.

to make the leap of faith required to believe that the man Jesus could also be Lord. Only through Platonism, which convinced him through its sound principles of the forms, the chief good, and the fact that because materialistic things are only a limited reflection of the true forms, evil and corruption can be found in the *absence* of perfection and not a *materialistic* presence in and of itself. The only ideology that refuted the problems Augustine found in Manicheanism was Platonist philosophy. It is only when he fully understood and embraced the Academics, the Platonists, that he was in a place to fully accept the teachings of Christianity. The Academics were extreme skeptics, putting everything into question because the highest good, the one, was beyond definition and so beyond articulated knowledge. This extreme skepticism was necessary to dismantle the ideologies that Augustine had adopted in life in order to open him up to Platonism and then Christianity. Augustine declares that “I came to the conclusion that the philosophers held much more probable opinions. After the manner of the Academics (as they supposedly are) I doubted everything and wavered in the midst of all things. Yet I resolved that the Manicheans must be abandoned.”⁴⁶ Christianity could not throw doubt upon Manicheanism. Platonism had to take away the very foundations of all certainty from Augustine before his heart and mind could be prepared to accept Christian truth.

From Platonism, the greatest of philosophies, in no small part due to the influence of St. Ambrose, Augustine decides that the undying wisdom, the fullest extent of the truth, is only to be found in embracing Christianity. Earlier, before his embracing of Platonism, Augustine acknowledges that Christianity is a reasonable faith that appears to have many wise advocates who can offer profitable arguments and responses to competing religions and philosophies. But

⁴⁶ Ibid.,93.

he does not acknowledge that he must view it as the only truth and therefore dedicate his life to it. However, upon his change of heart, when he learns to revere the Academics, the Platonists, Augustine is ready to revisit the advantages that he saw in the Christian religion and the influence of St. Ambrose. The final barrier to Augustine's embracing Christian theology, the faith that it required, was removed upon his ruminating on how much in this life he takes on faith. Augustine explains, "I considered how countless were the things that I believed, although I had not seen them nor was I present when they took place. Such were so many events in human history, so many things about places and cities that I had not seen, so many things about my friends, so many things about physicians, so many things about countless other men. Unless we believed these things, nothing at all could be done in this life."⁴⁷ When Augustine took on the ideology of the Manicheans, one of the appeals was the lack of faith necessary to practice its teachings. He found it easier to cast everything into uncertainty before having faith. It was only through the process of all his past certainty being stripped away and a realization of the compatibility of faith with living as a reasonable person in the world, that the groundwork was truly set for Augustine to embrace Christianity to its fullest extent.

For Augustine declares that it was through the will of God that he procured Platonists books. For "in them I read, not indeed in these words but much the same thought, enforced by many varied arguments, that 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him nothing was made. What was made, in him is life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.'"⁴⁸ He

⁴⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 100.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

recognizes that in these Platonists works, not in word but in spirit, convey the truth that he finds in the Sacred Scriptures. He does not liken Cicero, Manicheanism, or any other philosophy so closely to the truth of the Sacred Scriptures like he explicitly does here. However, he notes the limitation, in that even though the works contained such profound truths, they never, in word or in spirit, came to the notion that “he [God] ‘emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man,’ and that ‘he humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross.’”⁴⁹ The issue is that Platonism remains aligned with pagan philosophy. The works that Augustine was reading were that of the Neoplatonists like Porphyry, who sought to align paganism with Platonist thought. The Platonist Plotinus understood the one over the many argument, and explains that the One is “eternal because [its] originating principle always stays the same; not fragmenting itself in producing them, it remains entire.”⁵⁰ Therefore, Plotinus holds with the idea that the One never changes, so life, the intelligence, Being, the Good, and the soul are eternal and we, humans, are a part of the One. By acknowledging the eternal Goodness of the One, Plotinus aligns the One with the Christian idea of God. Hence, it is also proper to suppose that by arguing that humans can be part of the One, humans have within them something that aligns with the eternal: a soul. Christians also place emphasis on *imago Dei*, linking humans to God, and declaring that within humans is an immortal soul. Plotinus argues that “as we turn toward The One, we exist to a higher degree, while to withdraw from it is to fall. Our soul is delivered from evil by rising to that place which is free of all evils.”⁵¹ In a similar way to how Christians encourage Christ

⁴⁹ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 130-131.

⁵⁰ Plotinus, *The Essential Plotinus*, trans. Elmer O’Brien (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1975), 85.

⁵¹ Plotinus, *The Essential*, 85

followers to follow the way of Jesus, so those who wish to align themselves with the One, God, must turn toward the One and aligning their soul with the all good, eternal, unchanging One. Love is emphasized for both Platonists and Christians as a way to live out the eternal in their everyday material lives, thereby more closely aligning themselves with the One or God: “Further proof that our good is in the realm above is the love innate in our souls...the soul, different from the divinity but sprung from it, must needs love, its love is heavenly; here below, only commonplace.”⁵² It is through love that one can most closely reflect the divine, and Plotinus recognizes this, as he not only declares that is what aligns us with the One, but it is “heavenly.” Christians declare that God is Love, and that all love, even in its smallest earthly form, is but a reflection of the all-encompassing, unchanging, eternal Divine love of God. It is important to note that the “love” written about by the Platonists is more akin to *eros*, while the “Love” written about by Christians is more akin to agape love, so again the Platonists have the right notion but cannot go far enough in their philosophy without a true understanding of faith. The Platonists see that love is necessary, as it is a desire for good. In this way, love is there to serve a perceived lack in humans, whereas for Christians, the impulse to love comes from a desire for God, and therefore from a place of fulfillment rather than a lack of something. However, even with the differentiation in concepts, one can see the similarities between the Neoplatonist writers that Augustine writes about and the Christian principles he comes to believe in. Platonists understand, in spirit if not in direct letter, that God is the chief good and is love and so is worthy of praise and devotion. They do not comprehend how they can be reconciled to this good, which the Christians explain through the savior Jesus Christ.

⁵² Plotinus, *The Essential*, 85.

Augustine outlines his most mature and substantial comparison of Platonic principles and Christian doctrine in his talk with his mother Monica in Book 9 of *The Confessions*, “The New Catholic.” The conversation centered around “inquir[ing] of one another ‘in the present truth,’ which truth you are, as to what the eternal life of the saints would be like.”⁵³ By reflecting on the eternal, Augustine brought into light all the ideas of the One that he had encountered through the Platonists and that informed his understanding of the One as God. The Platonist philosophy can explain how to live a blessed life in the limited, temporal sense of reflecting upon the One. However, Christians conceive of an even larger blessing: that of eternal life, where when this earthly pilgrimage is done, the faithful soul will be brought into union with God through eternity, where the blessings of the One will be a permanent condition instead of a mere achievement of temporal man. Augustine speaks of the knowledge that was begun in him through the work of the Platonists and found its fulfillment in Christian doctrine: “this Wisdom itself is not made, but it is such as it was, and so it will be forever. Nay, rather, to have been and to be in the future do not belong to it, but only to be, for it is eternal.”⁵⁴ Like Plotinus declares, the One is eternal and unchanging, the source of love, perfection, and truth. However, we only get the afterlife and eternity, true communion with the One, with the Christian doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ the Lord. Augustine respects and holds onto the core values and ideas that Platonism gave to him, but he finally is able to find it in him to have faith and accept the Christian doctrine not only of the One as God, but how to have communion with the one through Jesus Christ the Lord. Augustine credits Platonism and the Neoplatonist writers such as Plotinus with his conversion to Christianity. He declares that it was willed by God that such must be the process of his

⁵³ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 184.

⁵⁴ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 184-185.

conversion, for without Platonism he would never have released his earlier notion of Manicheanism that he took up in his younger days.

Augustine utilizes Platonism differently in his works *The Confessions* and *The City of God*. In *The City of God*, one can see how he struggles against the limitations of philosophy, as well as the issues that arise when Neoplatonists like Porphyry seek to align Platonist ideology with paganist religions. By tackling *The City of God* first, even though it was written second, one can see the thought process of Augustine as he delineates in his earlier work *The Confessions*, and so get a better idea of what he is speaking about when explicating his faith journey. In *The Confessions*, he contends that it is only through Platonism, the highest and truest philosophy, that he could embrace the truths he found in Christianity. However, in *The City of God* he must contend *against* Platonism, or more exactly, Neoplatonism, as pagans and Platonists seek to argue that adoption of Christianity as the official religion of Rome was a central aspect of the downfall of the Roman Empire. In *The Confessions*, Augustine goes to great lengths to point out how the spirit of truth found in Platonist philosophy aligns with Sacred Scripture, but in *The City of God* he is careful to point out the limitations of philosophy. Philosophy has the ability to create logical arguments, to set up a worldview that answers most of the conundrums of human existence and allows for one to examine one's life and set up sound principles to follow. However, one cannot come to the conclusion on what is the ultimate good, who God is, and who they essentially are, without faith. Logic can create a solid foundation, but it is faith that ultimately provides the whole truth. If one is to avoid the snare of relativism and false idols, it is necessary to recognize that there is that in life and beyond life that is beyond human sensation. Christianity must contend with Platonist philosophy because it is the only worthy adversary in Augustine's mind, being the closest to Christian truth. However, it must not

be confused that by studying Platonism one can have the whole truth, for that is only found in acknowledgement of the One, which Platonism allows for, *and* the acknowledgement of how humanity may be united to the One, through the intercession of the One Himself through Jesus Christ.

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