

Augustine's "Nine Years" as a Manichee *

That great Augustinian scholar, Pierre Courcelle, has been one of the first to point out that Augustine's account of the duration of his Manichean sojourn presents an interesting inconsistency. Thus, as Courcelle himself explains :

Il est d'autant curieux de remarquer qu'Augustin a constamment déclaré avoir été manichéen pendant neuf ans, de la dix-neuvième à la vingt-huitième année. Puisque sa dix-neuvième année s'étend de novembre 373 à 374, et qu'il est toujours manichéen à la fin de son premier séjour romain, au cours de l'année scolaire 383-384 c'est au moins dix années pleines qu'il devrait compter ¹⁾.

Augustine's sustained consistency in declaring that he had been a Manichee for some « nine years » is substantiated by a variety of references in his writings, extending over a period of some ten years.

The first such case is in the *De moribus Manichaeorum* of 388, where he refers to himself as having been a member of that sect for a full nine years (*novem annos totos*) ²⁾. Here, the word *totos* does at least suggest a possible expansion of the period as required by Courcelle. However, subsequent references manifest an enduring insistence upon the idea of nine years. Thus, in the *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* of the same year, he describes the period as having lasted nine years (*novem annis*) ³⁾. Three years later, in the *De utilitate credendi* of 391, Augustine does seem to have become somewhat less certain about the time-span,

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¹⁾ Pierre COURCELLE, *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris 1950) 78. Note that according to present-day methods of calculating age Augustine would have been in his nineteenth year from his birthday in November 372 until the same date in November 373. This is the year preceding that given by Courcelle.

²⁾ *Op. cit.*, 68[19].

³⁾ *Op. cit.*, 34[18].

when he states that he had been a Manichee for *about* nine years (*annos fere novem*) ⁴).

After this, as far as I can see, there is no reference to the length of his Manichean sojourn for some six years. Then in the *Contra epistolam Manichaei* of 397, Augustine again declares without qualification that he had been a Manichee for nine years (*novem annis*) ⁵). In the *Confessions*, which appeared about the same time, or perhaps a few years later, there are two references to the Manichaeen sojourn as having lasted for *about* nine years ⁶). However, a third reference in the text gives the period as nine years, without qualification ⁷). With these three references in the *Confessions*, Augustine's estimates of the length of his Manichean sojourn would appear to cease. As I shall explain later, this termination can be seen as being not without significance.

However, one of the references in the *Confessions* when examined in its context, is of particular interest here in that it raises the inconsistency already alluded to by Courcelle. The reference in question is to be found at the beginning of the fourth book, when Augustine states the particular age-range during which he was a Manichee. As he himself puts it : « per idem tempus annorum novem, ab undevicensimo anno aetatis meae usque ad duodetricesimum » ⁸).

Now examining the larger context of the *Confessions* with this particular passage in mind, an inconsistency would seem to emerge. This arises as follows : in the beginning of the fifth book, Augustine states quite explicitly : « proloquor in conspectu dei mei annum illum undetricesimum aetatis meae » ⁹), whereby the reader is advised that the events which follow in the same fifth book belong to the twenty-ninth year of Augustine's life. There follow, his disappointing encounter with the Manichean bishop Faustus, his journey to Rome where he taught rhetoric (after having recovered from a serious illness) and his obtaining of the post of professional orator in Milan. Only after arriving in this city (and at the very end of the fifth book), does he make a

⁴) *Op. cit.*, 1.2.

⁵) *Op. cit.*, 11[10].

⁶) *Op. cit.*, 3.11.20 and 5.6.10.

⁷) *Op. cit.*, 4.1.1.

⁸) *Ibid.*

⁹) *Confessions* (hereafter : *Conf.*) 5.3.3.

definite decision to break with the Manichees : « I did at least decide that I must leave the Manichees » ¹⁰).

From these various considerations, and bearing in mind the above-mentioned intention of the fifth book, the reader can only conclude that Augustine's rupture with the Manichees occurred at the end of his twenty-ninth year and not during his twenty-eighth year as claimed at the beginning of the fourth book. It would therefore appear that Augustine's *Confessions* contains a blatant inconsistency in this regard.

Further, it requires but little reflection to appreciate how well Augustine's Manichean contemporaries could have capitalised upon this precious inconsistency. Once discovered by his former co-religionists, it would have exposed him to such charges as duplicity and deceit. Under such circumstances, Augustine would have regretted the fact that he himself provided his enemies with the weapons which they were using against him in the skirmish which would have followed upon his conversion. Herein, I would suggest, lies the reason for Augustine's silence about the length of his Manichean sojourn in those writings subsequent to the appearance of the *Confessions*.

Next, regarding the chronological inconsistency itself, it would seem of some importance to bear in mind Courcelle's observation that the chronological sequence of the *Confessions* is demonstrably not linear, but contains examples of events which are out of their proper temporal sequence ¹¹). On reflection, the reason for this is not far to seek. In essence, the *Confessions* is a recount of the workings of divine grace in the human soul, and not primarily a personal diary. Yet, for obvious reasons, both Augustine's religious adversaries in his own age, as well as the scholars of later centuries would be tempted to emphasize unduly the latter aspect.

However, such observations do not dispose entirely of the problem of the length of Augustine's Manichean sojourn. There still remains the interesting question of why Augustine himself, on numerous occasions over a period of some ten years, consistently refers to the sojourn as having lasted some nine years, when the known facts would seem to indicate that ten years is a more appropriate estimate ¹²).

In attempting to explain this seeming inconsistency, the first

¹⁰) *Conf.* 5.14.25. Cf. *Conf.* 6.1.1.

¹¹) Courcelle, *op. cit.*, 43-6.

¹²) Courcelle, *op. cit.*, 78.

reason to come to mind has already been suggested by Courcelle ¹³). The reformed Augustine was ashamed of that erroneous period of his wayward youth and therefore tended to shorten his estimate of its duration, whence the figure nine instead of ten. Consistently with this explanation, on several occasions Augustine refers to the sojourn as having lasted too long ¹⁴). Notwithstanding the merits of this explanation by Courcelle, it does not automatically exclude other sources of the inconsistency, especially in a personality as complex as that of Augustine.

Regarding other sources of the inconsistency, it would seem that the earlier chapters of the fifth book of the *Confessions* acquire a relevance when read against the background of certain ideas which Augustine had acquired by the time that he came to recounting the story of his conversion. In the fore-mentioned chapters, Augustine portrays himself as a disillusioned Manichee in a state of religious crisis. I have already explained elsewhere, what seems to me to have been an important source of this crisis ¹⁵). Further, as the fifth book testifies, Augustine's Manichean fervour declined markedly after his disappointing encounter with the long awaited Bishop, Faustus. Subsequently, Augustine migrated to Rome. There, though he still consorted with the Manichees, it would seem that he was more a Manichee by force of habit than by inner conviction. Thus, he says of himself at that time :

Certainly I quite openly persuaded this man in whose house I was staying not to have such excessive faith, which I could see that he had, in all those fables of which the books of Manes are full. Yet I still lived on more friendly terms with the Manichees than with others not of that heresy ¹⁶).

It can be said therefore, that at this stage of his disenchantment with Manicheism, Augustine was merely « going through the motions », without having inner convictions. In other words, he was a believer in appearance only. Later on in life, as a Bishop of the Catholic Church, he was to become painfully aware of this condition of counterfeit belief among the members of his own flock, with the flood of « converts »

¹³) *Ibid.*

¹⁴) This is intimated by the use of the word *diu* by Augustine on several occasions : *De duabus animabus* 9.11 and *De beata vita* 1.4. Cf. Courcelle, *op. cit.* 78.

¹⁵) Leo C. FERRARI, 'Astronomy and Augustine's Break with the Manichees, *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 19 (1973) 263-276.

¹⁶) *Conf.* 5.10.19. Cf.: Courcelle, *Op. cit.*, 78.

into the Church, more as a result of political pressures than from genuine inner convictions.

Meanwhile, the existence of counterfeit believers had been acknowledged by Augustine long before he came to writing his *Confessions*. Perhaps no biblical story better illustrates the phenomenon than the parable of the tares sown among the wheat¹⁷). Both will be suffered to grow and ripen, but only the latter will be gathered into the barn, while the former is destined for the consuming fires. It is significant here that this parable is mentioned implicitly as early as 389-391, in Augustine's *De vera religione*¹⁸). The date is a mere year or two after his first mention of his Manichean sojourn as having lasted some nine years.

In view of the previous considerations, it is arguable that Augustine discounted the last year of his Manichean sojourn, when he would have been more a believer in appearance only, rather than in reality. For this reason, he could well have thought of himself as having been a Manichee for only nine years, though the estimate of ten years may well have been closer to the facts as interpreted by an uninformed observer.

There remains yet another aspect of Augustine's estimate of his Manichean sojourn which could help explain the consistent choice of nine years for that period of time. Here it is instructive to take some account of Augustine's profound and enduring fascination with numerology. From his earliest¹⁹), to his latest works, there is an abiding faith in the mysterious power of numbers to reveal, not only the secrets of nature, but even the deeper levels of divine revelation in the Scriptures²⁰). Accordingly, under this latter aspect, Augustine saw every number in the Bible as endowed with a supernatural significance. Thus, to mention but a few examples among many, Augustine derives

¹⁷) *Matthew* 13.25-40.

¹⁸) *Op. cit.*, 50[27], where Augustine writes of those who are not afraid of being tares and chaff : « nec zizania nec paleas perhorrescunt ». Cf. : *op. cit.*, 15[8].

¹⁹) Thus, as early as 386 in the *De ordine*, Augustine makes repeated references to the value of being well versed in the science of numbers when it comes to understanding both material and immaterial creation : 2.15.43; 2.16.44 and 2.19.49. Similar references are to be found in the *De musica* of 387 : 6. [14]43-8. These are but the first of many such references to be found scattered throughout the works of Augustine.

²⁰) Thus, writing the *De doctrina christiana* in that section written in 396-7, Augustine discourses upon the value of the science of numbers for the study of the Scriptures : 2.16.25. Cf., W. G. Most, *The Scriptural Basis of St. Augustine's Arithmology*, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 13 (1951) 284-295.

convincing reasons for the existence of the four Gospels ²¹), for the fact that the apostles were twelve in number, and even for the miraculous draft of fishes in *John* 21 numbering one hundred and fifty-three ²³). At the basis of all these deductions was a profound conviction on Augustine's part that numbers were divinely sanctioned symbols of spiritual realities.

These numerological convictions of Augustine have certain implications for the *Confessions*, because this work is basically a particularised case of the larger biblical theme, namely the workings of divine grace upon mankind. In view of these considerations, it is conceivable that the accuracy of numerical details in the *Confessions* could be of secondary importance to Augustine's principal task of elucidating the workings of divine grace in the human heart. In other words, and with particular reference to the present topic, the spiritual significance of numbers in dates and time-spans would be more important than precise factual accuracy.

On this basis, and in view of Augustine's established symbolism for the various eligible numbers involved, there are cogent reasons for the choice of nine, over eight and ten, as the estimated number of years that he spent as a Manichee. Thus, both eight and ten are established in the Augustinian symbolism as being holy numbers ²⁴), which would hardly recommend their use in so sinful a context. However, the same does not apply in the case of the number nine. On the contrary indeed, it is an imperfect number, since it lacks one in order to become ten which signifies the perfection of beatitude ²⁵). Furthermore, this imperfect character of the number nine is implicit in one of Augustine's works as early as 387, or about one year before his first mention of his sojourn among the Manichees as having lasted nine years ²⁶).

²¹) *Enarratio in Psalmum* 103, sermo 3.2.

²²) *Ibid.* and *Enarratio in Psalmum* 108.10. Cf. : 49.10.

²³) *Enarratio in Psalmum* 49.10. Cf. : *In Psalmum* 150.1 and also *Sermo* 252.8 to 12.

²⁴) Thus, in *Epistola* 55, eight is a symbol of the Sabbath (23[13]) and its sanctity is substantiated from the Bible (*Ibid.*). Also, like 10, it signifies the perfection of our beatitude (28[15]). It is noteworthy that *Epistola* 55 was written a little after the year 400. Again, in *Enarratio in Psalmum* 6.1-2, eight is a holy number in that it signifies the Day of Judgement when the Elect will be received into Everlasting Glory. Examples of the sanctity of the number ten abound. Thus, for the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*: *In* 49.9; *In* 150.1. Again for the *Sermones*: 51.32[22] to 34[23]; 83.7[6]; 252.10[10]; 264.5 and 270.3.

²⁵) *Quaestionum Evangeliorum* 2.40.

²⁶) Thus, in the *De musica* (1.[12] 20-26), where Augustine explains how the numbers

One of the few occasions on which Augustine utilises at length the imperfect character of the number nine is to be found in the *Quaestionum evangeliorum* ²⁷⁾ which was written about 400, and therefore about the same time as the *Confessions*. The particular occasion is an exegesis of the biblical account of the healing of the ten lepers by Christ ²⁸⁾. As the traditional version has it, only one leper returned to give thanks. According to Augustine's exegesis, the nine symbolise those who are excluded from the company of the unity (*i.e.* the Church) embodied in him who did return. Likewise, in Augustine's own particular case, during his Manichean sojourn, he was also excluded from the unity of the Church ²⁹⁾. From a spiritual viewpoint therefore, it was fitting that that aberration lasted some nine years.

To explain thus, this particular use of the number nine in the *Confessions* on the basis of its established symbolism for Augustine may seem like unwarranted speculation. However, it appears somewhat less bizarre by adverting to another detail in the *Confessions* connected with the same number nine.

In this respect, and as a preliminary observation, it can be appreciated that by reason of its imperfection, the number nine symbolises the present earthly state of mankind which is to be perfected by the next stage, which is entrance into eternal beatitude (symbolised by the number ten) ³⁰⁾. Bearing this in mind, it is noteworthy that the death of Augustine's mother, Monica (whose proven sanctity overwhelmed him) is delayed until the ninth book of the *Confessions* ³¹⁾. In addition, as he himself informs the reader : « that devout and holy soul was freed from the body » on the ninth day of her illness ³²⁾.

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always progress from one to ten, then return to unity again. The imperfection of nine is also evident from the Roman numerals themselves. Thus, nine (IX) is ten (X) less unity (I).

²⁷⁾ *Quaestionum evangeliorum* 2.40.

²⁸⁾ *Luke* 17.11-19. Cf. : *Ibid.* 5.13-14.

²⁹⁾ Thus, Augustine refers to himself several times in the *Confessions* as having forsaken the unity in God for the distractions of the many in creatures (2.1.1; as also in 10.29.40 and 11.29.39).

³⁰⁾ This idea of the sanctity of the number ten finds repeated insistence in Augustine's writings. See footnote 24.

³¹⁾ *Conf.* 9.8.17.

³²⁾ *Conf.* 9.11.28. The tenth day would therefore find her in Paradise.