

Halley's Comet of 374 AD

New Light upon Augustine's Conversion to Manicheism*

From ancient records we know that a large, luminous shape suddenly made its appearance in the heavens early in the year 374 of the present era. Undoubtedly this eerie apparition caused widespread apprehension, as well as all kinds of speculation as to the possible significance of so unprecedented a phenomenon. However, as a result of Edmund Halley's work in the eighteenth century, we now know that that particular celestial apparition of 374 was but another visit by what has come to be known as Halley's comet. Yet it is noteworthy that even with the periodic nature of comets thus established to the satisfaction of the modern mind, their impact upon human speculations continues to be great nonetheless. In this regard, it is necessary only to recall the veritable ferment of predictions fostered by the sighting, late in 1973, of the comet, Kohoutek. How much greater therefore would have been the impact of such phenomena in antiquity, long before electric lights had blinded man to the majestic grandeur of the starry vault and in an age when the entire cosmos was permeated with awe and mystery.

Though the great Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was twenty years of age when the comet of 374 appeared in the heavens, he makes no explicit mention of this awesome apparition in such of his writings as are extant. Nevertheless, it is quite impossible that the phenomenon

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escaped his personal attention. Indeed, as the present study testifies, the unprecedented event was an important ingredient in his serious decision to abandon the Catholic beliefs in which he had been raised, and to adopt the religion of the Manichees¹). Appropriately enough, this sect was especially concerned with the heavens and even worshipped the sun and moon as divine envoys from a Kingdom of Light²). It can therefore be appreciated that the members of this religion, far more than any of their contemporaries, would have imputed supreme significance to the sudden, unheralded appearance of a large luminous body in the heavens.

In its own way the present study is the converse of evidence presented elsewhere³) for Augustine's final break with the Manichees. There, the appearance of darkness (through the fulfilment of predicted solar eclipses) was seen as an important ingredient in Augustine's growing disillusionment with Manicheism. Here, it is the appearance of light (in the form of Halley's comet of 374), which is portrayed as having led him into that religion in the first place. Not only therefore, does the present study also complement the first, but there is seen to be a certain inexorable logic involved, considering that Manicheism was concerned above all with the worship of Light.

To the modern mind, it may seem rather far-fetched that Augustine's involvement with Manicheism was so dependent upon what transpired in the heavens. Part of the reason for such puzzlement is that the modern mind has little appreciation of the all-pervasive influence of the stars upon human conduct in former ages. Particularly through the widespread art of astrology, the tyranny of the stars extended down to the most trivial details of people's lives⁴). Such influence was all the more pronounced in the case of Augustine in that his temperament inclined him to consider the beauties of the heavens as being of their very nature, far beyond comparison with any earthly beauties⁵).

¹) *Confessions* (hereafter : *Conf.*) 3.6-12.

²) *Contra Faustum* 14.11-12 & 20.1-4. Cf. *Conf.* 3.6.10.

³) Leo C. FERRARI, *Astronomy and Augustine's Break with the Manichees*, — *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 19 (1973) 263-276.

⁴) Cf. Franz CUMONT, *L'astrologie et la magie*, chapter 7 in his *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, Paris, 1906. As Cumont points out in that chapter, the tyranny of the stars extended even to such mundane matters as decisions about taking a bath or going to the hair-dresser.

⁵) Thus, in the *Soliloquies* he has Reason address him as follows : "You are not

Comets, of all the heavenly bodies, were especially recommended to the attention of the ancients, both by reason of their eerie appearance and because they seemed to obey none of the cyclic laws which governed the various other denizens of the starry vault ⁶). Their sudden, unheralded appearance in the sky was therefore a source of widespread solicitude. Thus, Manilius, in his *Astronomicon*, sees comets as presaging plagues and war ⁷). Again, Seneca remarks ironically that the particular comet which appeared during the reign of Nero did much to take away the bad reputation associated with comets ⁸).

However, while the general populace regarded comets as omens of impending evil, it is pertinent to present considerations that the Manichees would have had good reason for rejoicing over the sudden appearance of a comet in the sky. They regarded the sun and moon as divine beings and worshipped them as envoys from the Kingdom of Light ⁹). We can suppose therefore that they would have had a similar attitude to the unannounced appearance of a luminous comet in the sky. A special envoy was being sent from the Kingdom of Light, thus confirming the faith of the believers. Rather than being apprehensive, they had every reason to be jubilant. We may suppose that it was this rejoicing that brought them to the attention of the inquiring Augustine at the time of the appearance of the comet of 374.

Now the first requirement of such a hypothesis involving Halley's comet of 374 concerns chronological accord. In this regard, it is required that Augustine's conversion to Manicheism would have followed soon after the appearance of the comet. The second requirement of the hypothesis would be significant details in Augustine's own description of his conversion. Such details would at least intimate that the apparition of the comet had been an important factor in his decision to embrace the religion which worshipped light.

The first factor in the matter of chronological accord is the

so much delighted by the earth and her beauty, as by the beauty and magnificence of heaven." (*op. cit.* 1.11). Cf. *Conf.* 4.3.5.

⁶) It is noteworthy however, that certain of the ancients ventured so far as to speculate upon the possible cyclic recurrence of the comets. Such seems to have been the case with SENECA, *Naturales Quaestiones* 7.3.1 and PLINY, *Naturalis Historia* 2.23.94.

⁷) *Op. cit.* 1. 809 ff.

⁸) SENECA, *op. cit.*, 7.17.2.

⁹) See footnote 2.

question of the precise dates of the year 374 when Halley's comet would have been visible to the naked eye of an observer at Carthage (where Augustine was then living). Regarding these and other characteristics of that visitation by Halley's comet, I can do no better than quote from the description so kindly provided by Dr. Bryan Andrew, with the assistance of Dr. Lorne Avery at the console of the computer :

It was first visible to the naked eye from Carthage about March 1 (Julian time), reached maximum brightness April 1 and had faded from view around the end of April.... The Chinese first spotted it on March 4 and saw it as late as May 2. ... At its brightest, it was at transit (*i.e.* due south) around midnight, and was moving from lower left to upper right across the sky at about 12 or 13 degrees per day (looking due south at midnight). ... Between March 29 and April 4 the tail swung from being horizontally to the right (west) through vertical to horizontally left (east). The tail could have extended 40 or 50 degrees. At brightest the comet-head was about as bright as the brightest planets (*i.e.* 3^m). ¹⁰⁾

The second factor in chronological accord is that of the precise date of Augustine's conversion to Manicheism. Here, the question of importance is whether that conversion followed soon after the previously described visitation of Halley's comet. In qualifying this last statement (and at the risk of appearing somewhat arbitrary) it can be said that in terms of human time-reaction, the term "soon" would seem to imply a period of less than one year after the comet. With increased passage of time, the impact made by the celestial visitor would have inevitably faded from consciousness.

Regarding next the date of Augustine's conversion to Manicheism, we do at least have his own account of that event as recorded in the

¹⁰⁾ Dr. Bryan ANDREW, Radio Astronomy Section, Astrophysics Branch of the National Research Council of Canada (Ottawa), in a personal letter dated 23 September, 1974 (file : 3103-1). According to the same source, the comet facts are based on the work of T. KIANG (*Memoirs of the Royal Astronomical Society* 76 (1972) 27-66), who computed the orbits from Chinese records. Likewise with gratitude to Dr. Andrew, the brightness data are from S. K. VSEKHSVYATSKII, *Physical Characteristics of Comets*, translated by NASA and the Israel Program for Scientific Translations, 1964, NASATTF-80, OTS 62-11031, IPST Cat. No. 808 (available from Office of Technical Services, U. S. Department of Commerce, Washington, 25, D.C.). Dr Lorne AVERY (also of the Astrophysics Branch of the NRC of Canada) ran the computer program which turned the numbers from Kiang into usable data.

pages of the *Confessions*. There, it appears as the outcome of an intense desire for an other-worldly wisdom — a desire which was inspired by the reading of Cicero's book: *Hortensius*. As Augustine informs the reader, the discovery of that important book occurred in his nineteenth year ¹¹). Since Augustine was born on November 13, 354, by present methods of reckoning age, that information means that he discovered Cicero's book between November 372 and November 373 ¹²). Now recalling the information presented above, Halley's comet would have been visible from Carthage about March 1, 374. The two significant events therefore possess an impressive proximity to one another.

However, while Augustine informs the reader of the *Confessions* that the discovery of Cicero's *Hortensius* occurred in his nineteenth year, he does not indicate just how long after that event he embraced the Manichean religion. In this regard, that distinguished Augustinian scholar, John J. O'Meara sees the intervening period as merely a few days ¹³). However, concrete evidence for so short an interval does not seem available. Indeed, the sequence of events in the *Confessions* would seem to indicate otherwise. In working from such indications however, it is well to bear in mind Courcelle's well-founded warning that the chronology of the *Confessions* is neither linear nor uniform ¹⁴). Nevertheless, an examination of the text would seem to provide some idea of the time-interval between the *Hortensius* episode and the conversion of Augustine to Manicheism.

In the first place, it is noteworthy that that conversion is portrayed

¹¹) *Conf.* 3.4.7, *De beata vita* 4 and *Soliloquia* 1.17. It is also noteworthy that the *Hortensius* may have contained some significant reference to comets. However, since the text is not extant, this aspect cannot be investigated. Again, influence in the same direction from other works of the Cicero (who was so much admired by the young Augustine) is not to be excluded. Thus, in another work (*De natura deorum* 2.5.14), CICERO points to comets as one of the four principal reasons for the formation of the idea of the gods in the minds of men. However, as yet we do not know whether Augustine had already read this work by the time of the appearance of the comet in 374 AD.

¹²) In his *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin* (Paris, 1950) Pierre COURCELLE reckons the interval as extending from November 373 to November 374 (*op. cit.*, p. 78). This would have been even more convenient for the purposes of the present paper. However present methods of computing age would indicate the time-interval in my text.

¹³) John J. O'MEARA, *The Young Augustine; The Growth of Augustine's Mind up to his Conversion* (Longmans) 1954, p. 61.

¹⁴) COURCELLE, *op. cit.* pp. 43-6.

by Augustine as the outcome of a movement initiated by the reading of the *Hortensius*. Thus, that book awoke in Augustine's ardent young soul an intense desire for wisdom. Here however, Augustine's earlier religious training manifested itself, for the only thing that restrained him from being content with Cicero's notion of wisdom was that the name of Christ had no place there ¹⁵). Next therefore, he turned to the Scriptures in an effort to satisfy his newly-awakened yearning for wisdom ¹⁶). Being of too proud a disposition at that stage, he did not profit from such reading in the way that he should have, but looked further for some means of honouring Christ and simultaneously satisfying his thirst for wisdom. At that stage the Manichees trapped him (as Augustine puts it) by pretending to cater to both of his needs of that time ¹⁷).

As far as present considerations are concerned, the question of importance is how long did that intervening study of the Scriptures last. Considering that Augustine wrote the *Confessions* at about the age of forty-three, or a little later, this would mean that he was writing of his first venture into scriptural studies about a quarter of a century after the event. To have been significant in such a perspective, and at such a range, the interval would seem to have involved at least some months, rather than a few days. Somewhat the same conclusion would seem to be indicated by Augustine's own choice of words in describing the abortive venture: "Itaque institui animum intendere in scripturas sanctas" ¹⁸).

On the other extreme, there is the possibility that that first venture into scriptural studies lasted more than one year. This would seem to be excluded however, by another place in the *Confessions* where Augustine seems to be saying that he was already a Manichee at the age of nineteen, or that very same year in which he discovered Cicero's *Hortensius* ¹⁹). However, as far as the present hypothesis

¹⁵) *Conf.* 3.4.8.

¹⁶) *Conf.* 3.5.9.

¹⁷) *Conf.* 3.6.10. *De utilitate credendi* 1.2., where Augustine likens himself to a bird who had been trapped by the Manichees.

¹⁸) *Conf.* 3.5.9. It is noteworthy that Augustine uses similar words on another occasion where it would seem to have been question of more than a mere few days inquiry. Thus he says (*Conf.* 5.14.25) of his attempts to disprove the beliefs of the Manichees: "Tunc vero fortiter intendi animum, si quo modo possem ... manichaeos convincere falsitatis." Cf. *Sermo* 51.4-5.

¹⁹) *Conf.* 4.1.1.

is concerned, this possesses the unfortunate implication that Augustine would have already been converted to Manicheism *before* the arrival of the comet of 374.

One way of dealing with this difficulty would be to point out that Augustine would have been a mere four months into his twentieth year when he first witnessed the comet of 374. Writing of the event a quarter of a century later, it would have been legitimate to say that he was more nineteen than he was twenty at the time. Then again, as has been already pointed out by Courcelle, Augustine is not always consistent with the known facts in designating the length of time during which he was a Manichee ²⁰). One other way of dealing with the difficulty is by an examination of the language with which Augustine describes his own conversion to Manicheism, with a view to detecting any possible effects of the comet of 374. The next step is therefore to examine Augustine's own accounts of his conversion.

Interestingly enough, one does not have to read far in his account of that event in the *Confessions* before the celestial ingredients become manifest. Thus, writing of what the Manichees offered him he says :

On these dishes there was set before me, in my hunger for you, the sun and the moon, beautiful creations of yours, but nevertheless creations of yours and not you yourself, nor indeed the first of your creations. For your spiritual creations are before these physical creations, heavenly and shining (*lucida et caelestia*) as they are ²¹).

One can only conclude that the young Augustine was quite impressed by the Manichees' preoccupations with the heavens. Indeed, a little further along, the description contains yet more of the same :

But they in those dishes of theirs kept on putting before me glittering fantasies (*phantasmata splendida*), and it would be better to love the actual sun, which is real to our sight at least, than those false fantasies which make use of the sight to deceive the mind ²²).

Significantly too, much earlier in life, when describing the effects of the *Hortensius* upon him, Augustine again alludes to his venture into Manicheism with more celestial imagery :

²⁰) COURCELLE, *op. cit.* p. 78. See also, Leo Charles FERRARI, *Augustine's 'Nine Years' as a Manichee*, — *Augustiniana* 25 (1975), 210-216.

²¹) *Conf.* 3.6.10.

²²) *Ibid.*

I was inflamed [by the *Hortensius*] by such a great love of philosophy that I considered devoting myself to it at once. Yet I was not free of those mists (*nebulae*) which could confuse my course, and I confess that for a while I was led astray (*in errorem*), with my eyes fixed upon those stars that sink into the ocean (*labentia in oceanum astra*)²³.

This remarkable extract states quite literally that Augustine considered himself to have fallen into the error of Manicheism because he had paid too much attention to the stars in the heavens. The explanation acquires factual veracity if he had in mind the comet of 374 and its impact upon his search for wisdom.

Apart from such extracts which bear explicitly upon his conversion to Manicheism, there are many other passages in Augustine's writings which emphasise his preoccupation with what transpired in the heavens²⁴). To list all such references would be a vast undertaking indeed and beyond the scope of the present study. Suffice it merely to draw attention to Augustine's own acknowledgement in one of his earliest works that he himself practised daily contemplation of the stars²⁵). Furthermore, much later on in life, by the time that he had come to the writing of one of his mature works, he had become convinced that the unique upright stature of the human animal was a sign that it was divinely ordained to frequent contemplation of the heavens²⁶).

There can be no doubt that the Augustine who was thus so profoundly impressed with the grandeur of the heavens must have imputed a singular significance to the unheralded arrival of the eerie apparition embodied in the comet of 374. Indeed, as has been seen, both chronological accord of that event with his conversion to Manicheism, as well as certain allusions in his own descriptions of that conversion all constitute circumstantial evidence that it was that unprecedented event in the heavens which led him into the Manichean religion.

Admittedly, evidence so far adduced for this hypothesis is at

²³) *De beata vita* 1.4. (dates from 386, about 14 years before the *Confessions*.)

²⁴) Thus, "I was an eager student of the books of those who make horoscopes" (*Conf.* 4.3.5.). Cf. *Soliloquia* 1.4.

²⁵) *Contra academicos* 1.22. Cf. MARCUS AURELIUS, *Meditations* 11.27.

²⁶) *City of God* 14.4, 11 & 27; 22.24. The image is apparently derived (with some word-play upon "rectus") from *Ecclesiastes* 7.29.

best circumstantial. Essentially, it has been a matter of bringing together evidence which would seem to substantiate the hypothesis. This process is what the ancients would probably have termed the *via inventionis*. Evidence of another kind could be provided by use of the complementary process of what is known as the *via judicii*. In this, the hypothesis is assumed to be true and becomes a means of explanation. If it is found that the hypothesis explains certain facts which cannot be explained, or cannot be so well explained, without the hypothesis, then as an improved medium of explanation it must be accorded a higher level of respect.

In the case of what may here be termed my "Halley's Comet Hypothesis," such is indeed seen to the case with respect to two mysterious allusions which have hitherto disquieted certain Augustinian scholars. The enigmatical allusions make sense in the light of the above hypothesis.

The first such allusion is found in the continuation of a previously cited text (from the early *De beata vita*), concerned with the Hortensius episode and its aftermath. Because of its importance to present considerations, the extract will be quoted at length :

From the age of nineteen, having read in the school of rhetoric that book of Cicero's called *Hortensius*, I was inflamed by such a great love of philosophy that I considered devoting myself to it at once. Yet I was not free of those mists which could confuse my course, and I confess that for quite a while I was led astray, with my eyes fixed on those stars that sink in the ocean. A childish superstition (*superstitio quaedam puerilis*) deterred me from thorough investigation, and, as soon as I was more courageous, I threw off the darkness and learned to trust more in men that taught than in those that ordained obedience, having myself encountered persons to whom the very light, seen by their eyes, apparently was an object of highest and even divine veneration ²⁷).

The enigmatical allusion to "a childish superstition" which deterred Augustine has caused scholars quite some concern. As R. Jolivet puts it : "on a hésité sur le sens de ces mots" ²⁸). Jolivet then proceeds to explain the strange allusion through the influence

²⁷) *De beata vita* 1.4.

²⁸) *Œuvres de Saint Augustin; IV Dialogues Philosophiques* (Bibliothèque Augustinienne) Paris, 1948, p. 289.

of the blind faith of Augustine's Catholic childhood- a faith which later terrified him and tore him away from the study of philosophy. A somewhat similar explanation is proposed by Alfarić ²⁹).

It might have been possible to discount those few enigmatical words of Augustine's, except for the fact that they recur in the same context (of his induction to Manicheism) in Augustine's later work : *De utilitate credendi* :

For, what else forced me for almost nine years, during which time I rejected the religion which my parents had implanted in me as a child, to follow these men [i.e. the Manichees] and diligently to listen to them, save that I was terrified by superstition (*superstitioni terreri*) ³⁰).

Courcelle sees this second allusion to superstitious terror in the above context as throwing light upon the first one in the *De beata vita*. As the very initial wording of Courcelle's explanation suggests, however, it is again an explanation involving an arbitrary assumption, and which for all that still fails to remove the disturbing quality from Augustine's strange allusions. Thus, Courcelle's explanation proceeds as follows :

Il faut croire que, dans l'entourage d'Augustin, certains catholiques s'étaient inquiétés de sa curiosité intellectuelle à l'égard des livres saints qu'il venait d'ouvrir; ils avaient jugé comme un irrespect à l'égard de l'autorité religieuse l'éveil de son esprit critique ³¹).

Again, in this explanation Courcelle has made use of Augustine's first attempt at studying the Scriptures, as mentioned in the *Confessions* ³²). Though this study does intervene between the Hortensius episode and Augustine's conversion to Manicheism in the previously mentioned context, it hardly seems justified in attempting to explain Augustine's enigmatical allusions to "superstitious terror". On neither occasion when Augustine makes this strange allusion is there any reference to scriptural studies to be found in the same context. Again,

²⁹) Prosper ALFARIĆ, *L'évolution intellectuelle de Saint Augustin*, I, Paris, p. 70, note.

³⁰) *De utilitate credendi* 1.2. This work dates from 391, which is five years after the reference to "terror" in the *De beata vita*.

³¹) Pierre COURCELLE, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

³²) *Conf.* 3.5.9.

it is difficult to see how Courcelle's explanation accounts for the fact that that same "superstitious terror" induced Augustine to follow the Manichees for some nine years, as his previously cited extract informs us that it did.

Finally, all the previous attempted explanations are very tame ones compared with the violence implied in Augustine's allusions to "superstitious terror". It is obviously question of some unique event which seized Augustine with a consuming fear and dread, which inspired the enigmatical allusions well over a decade later. So much then for the attempts at explaining these mysterious allusions of Augustine. The explanations are based upon certain assumptions which do not seem to be warranted either on the basis of the context or on the language employed by Augustine himself.

On the other hand, the mysterious allusions to "superstitious terror" would seem to be much more satisfactorily explainable (and together lose their enigmatical character) in the light of the "Halley's Comet Hypothesis." It would appear that the unannounced arrival of that eerie apparition in the sky over Carthage in March, 374, struck terror in the heart of the young Augustine. The Manichees claimed not only to be able to explain that unprecedented phenomenon, but also to be able to account for it as an envoy of hope rather than of impending doom. It seems that it was this claim which was a powerful factor in the young Augustine's decision to join that sect of which he remained a member for some nine years.

Such being the presumed course of events, then the sudden arrival of the comet would have intruded upon the young Augustine's search for wisdom — a search initiated only a little earlier by the reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*. Augustine's resulting terror from the comet's eerie intrusion upon the accustomed order of the heavens would have jolted him into another line of inquiry which was to lead him into Manicheism, or the religion which (appropriately enough) worshipped Light. And all this transpired because of the young Augustine's fascination with the heavens; a fascination which was to accompany him through life.

The above postulated chain of events would seem to be clearly implied by Augustine's own words in the description of his interrupted quest of wisdom in the aftermath of the *Hortensius* episode :

Sed neque mihi nebulae defuerunt, quibus confunderetur cursus meus; et diu fateor, quibus in errorem ducebar labentia in

oceanum astra suspexi. Nam et superstitio quaedam puerilis me ab ipsa inquisitione terrebar ³³).

Finally, granted the validity of the "Halley's Comet Hypothesis", there is a certain fittingness to the initiation and to the termination of Augustine's Manichean sojourn. It seems that he was led into the sect in the first place by its claim to be able to explain an unprecedented eerie apparition in the heavens over Carthage in 374. In the end, it appears that he became disillusioned with the same religion when it could not compete with the science of his times in predicting the solar eclipses of 378 and 381 ³⁴). Augustine's fascination with the heavens therefore appears to have been a decisive factor in his relations with the Manichees.

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³³) *De beata vita* 1.4.

³⁴) Leo FERRARI, *Astronomy and Augustine's Break with the Manichees*, — *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 19 (1973) 263-276.