

Porphyry's Criticism of Christianity and The Problem of Augustine's Platonism

Christos Evangeliou

I

Verus philosophus est amator Dei, stated Augustine in the central part of *De civitate Dei*, and one has the feeling that this confession, unlike some others, has a ring of sincerity.¹ To him the truth of this statement was self-evident and needed no explanation other than mentioning that, by Pythagorean etymology, the true philosopher is a lover of wisdom and, by Scriptural authority, God is the source of true wisdom as summarized in the triptych, *causa subsistendi, ratio intelligendi, ordo vivendi*.² In the light of these statements, it is easy to see why Augustine believed that Platonism, of all Hellenic schools, came as close to the revealed truth of the Bible as was humanly possible.³ Because of this perceived affinity his writings are characterized by a tone of admiration of Platonists, especially Porphyry.⁴

In the same light it is not surprising that, in their efforts to find an explanation of Augustine's rapprochement to Platonism, scholars have wondered whether he was converted to Christianity or to Neoplatonism,⁵ whether Porphyry's name should be substituted for the name of Plotinus in the chain, Plotinus-Victorinus-Augustinus,⁶ whether those mysterious *libri platoniorum*, which liberated him from the perplexing snares of Manicheanism, should

1. *De civitate Dei* (hereafter abbreviated as DcD) VIII. 1. About the fictionalized and "typical" character of the *Confessiones*, see J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine* (London: Longmans, 1954), pp. 17-19, and compare with R.J. O'Connell, *St. Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of the Soul*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1969), p. 9.

2. DcD VIII. 4.

3. In DcD VII. 5, Augustine asserts that "No school has come closer to us than the Platonists." Unless stated otherwise, all translated quotations will be from the Loeb edition of DcD.

4. In DcD VIII. 12, the list of Platonists includes Apuleius, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Porphyry.

5. P. Alfarc, *L'évolution intellectuelle de saint Augustin*, (Paris: E. Nourry, 1918), p. 379, claims that "c'est au Neoplatonisme qu'il s'est converti plutôt qu'à l'Évangile."

6. J. O'Meara, "The Neoplatonism of St. Augustine," in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, D.J. O'Meara, ed., (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1982); and P. Hadot, *Porphyre et Victorinus*, 2 vols., (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1968), I, p. 22, who follows W. Theiller, *Porphyrios und Augustin*

be identified as Plotinian or Platonic;⁷ and whether or not the *De regressu animae* should be considered part of Porphyry's *De philosophia ex oraculis haurienda*.⁸

From these interminable debates I will try to stay away. Instead, I shall attempt to read DcD, Book X, as a Platonist would, in order to find answers to the following questions: What was Augustine's response to Porphyry's challenge? In other words, what exactly did he think of this unusual Platonist whom he characterizes not only as *doctissimus* and *nobilissimus*, but also as *impius* and *accerrimus inimicus*;⁹ and with whom he argues vehemently about the *true way* of salvation? Since Porphyry was the recognized defender of Hellenic polytheism and a formidable foe of Christianity, during the long struggle for the hearts and minds of the Greco-Romans,¹⁰ it would be enlightening to examine Augustine's response, if any, to this challenge.

Specifically, in my reading of DcD I will be searching not for new fragments and direct quotations, but for some echoes and traces of Porphyry's criticism of the doctrines and practices of the early Church, which he advanced in the *Kata Christianon*.¹¹ In this

(Halle: M. Niemeyer Verlag, 1933), argue in support of the importance of Porphyry as a source of influence on Augustine, contrary to P. Henry and others who have declared *pro* Plotinus.

7. E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, translated by L. Lynch, (New York: Random House, 1960), pp. 232 and 362, no. 39; and P. Henry, *Plotin et l'occident*, *Spicilegium sacrum Louaniense* 15, (Louvain, 1934), pp. 83ff.

8. J. O'Meara, *Porphyry's Philosophy from Oracles in Augustine*, (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1959), p. 36; and P. Hadot's critical remarks, "Citacions de Porphyry chez Augustine," *Revue des études augustiniennes vi.1.*, (1960): 205-244.

9. *Augustini opera omnia*, 11 vols., S. Maurus, ed., (Paris: Maume Fratres, 1838), VII 1050A, 909C, 420B.

10. The struggle ended with the closure of the Athenian schools of philosophy in 529 A.D. On this, see P. Courcelle, *Late Latin Writers and their Greek Sources*, translated by H.E. Wedeck, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969); E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1970); C. Evangelioiu, *Aristotle's Categories and Porphyry*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988); A.H.M. Jones, "The Social Background of the Struggle Between Paganism and Christianity," in *Paganism and Christianity in the 4th Century A.D.*, A. Momigliano, ed., (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1963); P. de Labriolle, *La réaction païenne*, (Paris: L'artisan du livre, 1948); and R.L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

11. The fragments have been collected and edited by A. von Harnack, *Porphyrios Gegen die Christen*, 15 Bucher, (Berlin: Abhandlungen der königlich-preussische Akademie der Wiissenschaften, philosophisch-historische Klasse, Nr. I, 1916). For extensive discussion of the fragments, see A. Georgiades, *Περὶ τῶν Κατὰ Χριστινῶν Ἀποσπασμάτων τοῦ Πορφύριου*, (Leipzig: Baer & Hermann, 1891); P. de Labriolle, "Por-

respect, my task is different from that of O'Meara and Hadot.¹² My reading would suggest that Augustine's references to *De regressu animae*, *De philosophia ex oraculis haurienda*, and the *Epistula ad Anebo*, should be seen as part of his apologetic strategy of defending the faith by criticizing its pagan critic. Since Porphyry's book had been already answered by authorities, whose knowledge of Greek was better than Augustine's, and had become a forbidden subject, he had to be cautious about it.¹³

If the hypothesis that, in Book X of DcD and in a veiled way for the stated reasons, Augustine is responding to anti-Christian arguments formulated by Porphyry and voiced by his many followers is correct, it will provide us with some grounds for: (1) considering Augustine a belated but subtle apologist who was aware of and responsive to Porphyry's criticism of Christianity; (2) evaluating the relation of Platonism and Christianity, in terms of incompatibility, as Augustine progressively saw it; (3) judging more objectively the validity of Harnack's theory, regarding the collected fragments of Porphyry's book; and (4) understanding the philosophical differences which sustained the conflict between Christian monotheism and Hellenic polytheism for so long that it has not lost its relevance for some sensitive souls even in our time.

phyre et le christianisme," *Revue d'histoire de la philosophie*, 3 (1929): 385-440; J. Moffatt, "Great Attack on Christianity, II" *Expository Times*, 93 (1931): 72-78; A.B. Hulien, *Porphyry's Work Against the Christians: An Interpretation*, Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Press, 1933); F. Scheidweiler, "Zu Porphyrios Κατὰ Χριστιανῶν," *Philologus*, 99 (1955): 303-312; S. Pezzella, "Il problema del *kata christianon* di Porphyrio," *Eos* 52 (1962): 87-104; M. Anastos, "Porphyry's Attack on the Bible," in *The Classical Tradition*, L. Wallach, ed., (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966); J.M. Demarolle, "Un aspect de la polemique paienne à la fin du IIIe siècle, le vocabulaire chrétien de Porphyre," *Vigiliae Christianae*, XXVI, (1972): 117-129; T.D. Barnes, "Porphyry Against the Christians: Date and Attribution of Fragments," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. XXIV, (1973): 424-442; A. Meredith, "Porphyry and Julian Against the Christians," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt II. 2.*, W. Haase, ed., (Berlin: W. De Gruyter, 1980).

12. See note No. 8 above. For both O'Meara and Hadot the point of departure is H. Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, *Recherches d'Archeologie, de Philosophie et d'Histoire*, (Cairo, 1956). With good reason Hadot does not accept O'Meara's identification of the two treatises, assuming that the *De regressu animae* was a separate work. This assumption is questionable.

13. J. Bidez, *Vie de Porphyre*, (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1964), pp. 78-79, provides a list of those who responded to Porphyry and valuable information about the suppression of the book.

II

When Plotinus died in 270 A.D., Porphyry was in Sicily recovering from an illness.¹⁴ He was approaching his forties. He had received an excellent education at the Platonic schools of Longinus and Plotinus located respectively in Athens and Rome. He succeeded Plotinus as head of the school and became, in time, the most distinguished representative of Platonism in the West. Thus, he was well informed and well placed to play a major role in the intellectual developments of that time, especially the intensified strife between Hellenism and Christianity which were to fundamentally transform the Greco-Roman world very soon.¹⁵

Unlike Plotinus, Porphyry was a trained philologist and, in Eunapius' judgment, an accomplished stylist. His many and lucid commentaries on Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus reflected these qualities and helped clarify several points of dispute, while popularizing the doctrines of these great philosophers.¹⁶ Recognizing, apparently, the threat which the progressively intolerant character of the organized Church represented to the polytheistic culture of the Greco-Roman world, Porphyry used his philological and philosophical training to defend Hellenism. Hence the genesis of his polemic writings which included the critique *Against the Christians* in fifteen books.¹⁷

Although Porphyry was neither the first nor the last to write against Christianity, for Celsus and Galen had preceded him and Hierocles and Julian were to follow, it is significant that only his book was perceived as extremely dangerous and singled out for refutation by Church Fathers and repeated suppression by Byzantine emperors. Ecclesiastical dignitaries, such as Eusebius of Caesarea, Methodius of Olympus, Apollinarius of Laodicea, and others responded to Porphyry's challenge. Unfortunately, none of these books has survived perhaps because, as has been suggested,

14. Porphyry, *Vita Plotini*, 2 (hereafter abbreviated as VP).

15. Within a generation of Porphyry's death, Constantine the Great had recognized the Christian faith as legitimate in 313; had fixed the dogma of Trinity in 325; had censured Arius (and Porphyry) in 325; and had transferred the seat of Roman Empire to Byzantium, appropriately renamed Constantinople, in 330.

16. For a complete list of Porphyry's commentaries, see Bidez, *op. cit.*, Appendices 67ff.

17. VP 16. Elsewhere, "Plotinus' Anti-gnostic Polemic and Porphyry, *Against the Christians*, in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, R. Wallis and J. Bregman, eds., (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, forthcoming), I have argued that the same spirit pervades Porphyry's critique and Plotinus' attack on Gnosticism.

even quotations from the impious book, which the Church Fathers used in their refutations, were considered dangerous.¹⁸

The few fragments of Porphyry's book, which have survived, are treasured today as valuable evidence of the first systematic critique of the early Church by a renowned philosopher. Porphyry has been considered, among other things, as the forerunner of Biblical criticism as developed in the nineteenth century, since he was the first to show on historical and philological evidence that the book of Daniel was of Maccabean origin and, therefore, a post-event-prophecy.¹⁹ He has also been compared to modern anti-Christian writers such as Voltaire and Renan because of his witty, pointed, and philologically accurate criticism of the Biblical texts.²⁰

Be that as it may, the fact remains that Porphyry's book, in addition to stirring up strong emotions on both sides as the long list of respondents indicates, seems to have focused attention to many absurdities in the ecclesiastical practice and certain weaknesses in the logical structure of the Christian doctrine. Thus, indirectly and unintentionally, the pagan philosopher helped the Church Fathers articulate the orthodox dogma more coherently in the following centuries. He also helped his fellow Greco-Roman pagans realize the danger which the new monotheistic, exclusive, dogmatic, and irrational Christian faith (*alogos pistis* and *barbaron tolmema* are his characterizations of it) represented to the accustomed ways of thinking, speaking, and acting in their civilized world. Armed as it were with divine revelations, mystical rites, and a universal way to salvation, the Church represented a real threat, in Porphyry's view, not only to free philosophical speculation and rational discourse, but also to the ancient traditions of simple polytheistic piety and religious tolerance. Augustine was puzzled and pained, as we will see, that a man with Porphyry's excellent qualifications had refused to side with the forces of the triumphant *Ecclesia*.²¹ So much about the circumstance and importance of Porphyry's book. We may now turn to briefly examine his

18. For instance, A.B. Hulén, *op. cit.*, p. 25, remarks correctly that "Without doubt his nearness to the Christian position made his polemic more dangerous." Similarly T.W. Crafer, "The Work of Porphyry Against the Christians and Its Reconstruction," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, XV (1913-14): 481-512, observes that "The deadliness of Porphyry's polemic seems to have consisted largely in his merciless ridicule of the Gospels."

19. For a detailed discussion of Porphyry's treatment of Daniel and the fury which it created, see Wilken, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-163, Harnack, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-73, and Anastos, *op. cit.*, with bibliography.

20. Labriolle, *op. cit.*, pp. 385-440. According to Hulén, *op. cit.*, p. 10, Catholic opponents called Luther the "New Porphyry!"

21. It is indicative of the appeal of Porphyry's book that, one hundred and fifty years after his death, there were still pagans who followed his views. Therefore, Augustine had to address these views in DcD X 29.

strategy and some of the questions whose echoes are discernible in the DcD.²²

III

Porphyry's strategy was based on the principle that an attack can be more effective if it is fought in the opponent's territory using the same weapons; in this case, the Scriptures; and if it is concentrated on the important issues without ceasing to be specific and to the point. Thus, compared to Celsus' or to Julian's anti-Christian works, Porphyry's critique has three characteristics, in so far as the extant fragments permit us to form a reasonable judgment.²³ First, it avoids generalities by concentrating on specific logical, philological, historical, and philosophical points with the clear purpose of discrediting the authority of the Scriptures on which the Christians could base their claims of divine revelation, worship of the only true God, and eternal salvation. Second, it makes an important distinction between Jesus, who is neither praised nor blamed but, rather, ignored, and the Apostles, Peter and Paul in particular, who are targeted for a frontal attack as propagators of the follies of a fantastic faith which they shamelessly fabricated. Third, it questions the fundamental doctrines of monotheism, incarnation, and resurrection because they, more than anything else, made Christianity unacceptable to and irreconcilable with Hellenism.

For our purposes here we need not indulge in Porphyry's many and pointed philological criticisms by which he shows that the evangelists occasionally misquote the prophets and flatly contradict each other, so that they appear to be neither divinely inspired nor even well trained as Biblical scholars. We can only notice in passing that Porphyry's objections to the sacrament of baptism are grounded on social and moral considerations. He thinks, for instance, that the propagation of baptism as a way of spiritual catharsis is utterly revolutionary not so much because it makes salvation too easy to attain, but because it makes nonsense of the traditional conception of *arete* as a difficult personal achievement.²⁴

22. For more detailed discussions and evaluations of the fragments, see the references cited in note No. 11 above.

23. The sketch which follows assumes that Harnack's thesis is correct in tracing the fragments in Makarius to Porphyry. The echoes which we will discuss in section IV confirm this thesis. The numbering of the fragments is that of Harnack's edition.

24. Fragment 88 (Makar. IV 19). The belief that baptism can cleanse the soul from all stains of sin will encourage people to commit all sorts of wrongdoing, in Porphyry's view, which is echoed in DcD XXI 25.

By preaching to the masses that no matter what one does and how he/she lives the door to heaven will always remain open through a baptism in the name of a savior, the Christians appeared as guilty as the Gnostics, to Porphyry's eyes, for selling salvation cheaply, while undermining the moral foundations of a civilized society.²⁵

However, we should take serious note of the fact that Porphyry concentrated the fire of his criticism on the divine nature of the Christian deity and the two related doctrines, incarnation and resurrection, which made Christianity appear as utter foolishness to the philosophically-minded men of that time. It is no accident, I think, that from these same doctrines a host of heresies sprang up as soon as Christians had the necessary leisure and adequate education to examine the foundations of their revealed faith and tried to understand it rationally. Nor is it an accident that the echoes which we find in Augustine's work primarily relate to Porphyry's criticism of these central doctrines, as we will see in the following section.

As a Platonist Porphyry did not conceive the problem of the divine nature in the same way as the Christians did, that is, as an exclusive disjunction of the type "either one God or many gods." In his understanding of the question, polytheism did not exclude but, instead, incorporated monotheism by recognizing One Supreme Principle as the source of the entire hierarchical cosmic order which extends from the incorporeal *kosmos noetos* to the corporeal universe with its celestial gods, terrestrial demons, heroes and demigods, human and non-human souls and so forth. The problem with the Christians is that, in Porphyry's view, they do not understand the meaning of *monarchia* as applied to God. As the philosopher understands it, the meaning of this term implies that there is one God who rules over other inferior gods with whom he magnanimously shares the governance of the great universe as expressed in a continuous and hierarchical chain of entities without unbridgable gulfs.²⁶

For the Christian view, on the other hand, as expressed by Augustine in the *DcD*, Book X, there is a gap between God and man which can be bridged only by divine mediation. Hence the need for the elaborate *mysterium* of the incarnated God who dies and is resurrected for the sake of man. Although Augustine accepted the mystery as the only instrument of salvation, Porphyry thought

25. In VP 16, Porphyry mentions efforts within Plotinus' school to effectively combat Christian Gnosticism.

26. Fragment 75 (Makar. IV 20). Μονάρχης γὰρ ἐστὶν οὐχ ὁ μόνος ὢν, ἀλλ' ὁ μόνος ἄρχων. See also A.H. Armstrong, "Buddhi in the Bhagavadgita and Psyche in Plotinus," *Religious Studies*, 15 (1979): 327-342.

of the whole story as a combination of foolishness, impiety, and blasphemy. It would seem, then, that on this essential point, Christian doctrine and Platonic philosophy radically disagreed.

Furthermore, the story of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, as told by the evangelists, appeared to Porphyry *asymphonon* and *heterophomon*, that is, inconsistent and incongruous which he took as convincing evidence that, "The evangelists are not reliable reporters but inventors of the events surrounding Jesus."²⁷ Evidently, the spectacle of the crucified god was repugnant to the Platonist philosopher whose eyes were filled with the radiant beauty of *kosmos noetos* and the Supreme God mystically envisioned. To Porphyry's critical mind, either Jesus was a god in which case the cross was meaningless or he really suffered on the cross in which case he was not a god. As the history of the heresies shows, the Fathers of the Church had to display great dialectical acuity to escape the horns of this dilemma in formulating the orthodox theanthropic dogma which finally conceived and described Jesus as true God and true man.

Besides, when compared to the behavior of such sages as Socrates and Apollonius of Tyana in their respective trials, Jesus' silence and performance in the court seemed to Porphyry, as it seemed to Bertrand Russell a thousand years later, entirely inappropriate even for a trained philosopher, let alone a divine person. He asks, for instance: "How could He [Christ] be subjected to passion, since *qua* God he was supposed to be impassible (*apathes*)?" And again: "What was the reason that Christ said nothing worthy of a wise and divine man when he was brought to the high priest and the governor? . . . He acted most unlike Apollonius who disappeared from the royal court after he had spoken with frankness to the emperor Domitian."²⁸

Porphyry also wondered about the logic of the Christians who rejected the statues of the traditional gods as inappropriate habitations for the divine, while they believed that their incarnated son of God became a baby borne by a woman through the usual messy process of birth. To the Hellenic philosopher it did not seem rational to think of a woman's womb as cleaner material than the snow-white Parian marble from which the statues of gods were made, "Assuming that there were some Greeks so light-minded

27. Fragment 15 (Makar. II 12). Τοὺς εὐαγγελιστὰς ἐφευρετὰς οὐχ ἴστορας τῶν περὶ τὸν Ἰησοῦν γεγενέσθαι πράξεων. In *De nsensu evangelistarum*, Augustine had much to say about this charge. See also P. Courcelle, "Propos anti-cretiens raportes par saint Augustin," *Recherches augustiniennes*, Sappl. a la *Revue des études augustiniennes*, I, (1958), 149-186.

28. Fragment 84, and Fragment 63 (Makar. III 1).

as to believe that the gods resided inside the statues."²⁹

More importantly, Porphyry clearly saw that the tale of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of the son of God was directly related to the question of the bodily resurrection of the faithful for whom the story had been invented (*mythopoia*). As a genuine Platonist Porphyry, of course, had no doubt about the immortality of the soul, but he found the popular Christian belief in the resurrection of the body absurd. For Porphyry, unlike Augustine, even an omnipotent God cannot do the logically impossible, e.g. undo what the Greeks did to Troy or, more to the point, put back together the body of a drowned fisherman which had been eaten by the fish, which had been eaten by other fishermen whose bodies will be eaten by worms which will be eaten by birds and so on *ad infinitum*.³⁰

Moreover, in Porphyry's view, it makes no sense to believe that the resurrection of the body will follow the destruction of the entire world, that is, that this great, beautiful, and well-ordered cosmos will perish, while the unwashed bodies of some Christian saints will be preserved for eternity. To him such eschatological doctrines are not only irrational and blasphemous but also indistinguishable from the Gnostic follies which both Porphyry and Plotinus had laboriously exposed as such. The philosopher had expected that his fellow Greco-Romans would see the truth in these matters, close their ears to the oriental sirens of Gnosticism and Christianity, and so hold on to their religious traditions believing that, "The greatest fruit of piety is to honor the Gods according to traditional custom."³¹ Porphyry certainly expected too much from the common people. The sirens proved to be irresistible and very seductive indeed as the history of the Church shows in the century following his death.

However, Porphyry was not a close-minded conservative. Nor was he a blind traditionalist unable to see the ugly spots of the old religions. He knew very well that at the level of popular beliefs and practices any educated Christian could easily turn the tables against him by pointing to the many absurdities, superstitions, and barbaric practices of the various cults which had flooded Rome by the end of the third century. Augustine did exactly that at the first part of the DcD. But the fact remains that Porphyry, especially in his *Epistle to Anebo*, had been as critical of popular paganism as he ever was of Christianity, a fact which even Augustine noted with approval.³²

29. Fragment 77 (Makar IV 22).

30. Fragment 94 (Makar. IV 24).

31. *Ad Marcellam*, 17, translation mine.

32. DcD X. 11. Porphyry's positive comments on pagan rites, in *De*

What made Porphyry so important, in this connection, is that he clearly saw the choice which a responsible person had to make in that critical time. The choice, as he saw it, was between a pluralistic society of tolerance which was prepared to accommodate the different gods as worshipped by the Greco-Romans and the "barbarians" (that is, Chaldeans, Egyptians, Jews, Indians, and so forth); and a society of bigotry and intolerance in which a single religious sect would be allowed to impose its own creed and its own way, as the *only way* of salvation, upon all others. Porphyry considered the Church of his time as representing such a threat and acted analogously.³³

Besides, Porphyry was aware that a tolerant society could, and actually had, allowed in the past for the rise of certain free spirits above the restrictive customs of the groups in which they happened to be born, in search for the One Supreme God of Platonic philosophy. In the time of Porphyry, this possibility had become a reality in the school of Plotinus where Platonism was reborn and flourished. There the Egyptian-born Eustochius, the Phoenician-born Porphyry, the Etruscan-born Amelius, the Roman-born Catricius and many other educated men of the Greco-Roman world had come together to listen to Plotinus who used the divine language of Plato and philosophized about the beauty of the sensible cosmos and about the flight of the human soul in love with the divine wisdom and source of that beauty. Porphyry has preserved for us the lofty thoughts of this group in passages like the following: "The wise man honors God, even when he is silent; the ignorant man dishonors God, even when he offers his prayers and sacrifices."³⁴ And again "To the supreme God offer no material thing at all, not even incense or words . . . The only holy offer to this God should be the lifting up of the soul."³⁵

No wonder, then, that a sensitive soul, like Augustine's, was moved by the wisdom of Porphyry's Platonism. Unfortunately, Porphyry was a Platonist unlike the others on a crucial point. Intelligently and forcefully he had undertaken the difficult task of (a) defending Hellenism by explaining the meaning of old pagan rites, oracles, statues, gods and goddesses; and (b) mercilessly attacking such Christian practices as Baptism and Eucharist, and such central Christian doctrines as incarnation, resurrection and universal

philosophia ex oraculis haurienda, contrast sharply with his skeptical remarks, in *Epistula ad Anebo*, and were well exploited by Augustine in order to show his opponent's *inconstantia*.

33. In Augustine's view, Porphyry was betraying pure Platonism in order to accommodate the people's need for demon worship.

34. *Ad Marcellam* 16. translation mine.

35. *De Abstinencia* II 34, translation mine.

salvation. Hence Augustine's problem. He admired and praised Porphyry as a Platonist, but he found his determined opposition to Christianity arrogant, which may explain much of his ambiguous attitude towards the philosopher as we will see.

IV

In Augustine's architectonic design, DcD falls naturally into two parts. In Books XI-XXII, he traces the parallel development and destinies of the two cities, the earthly and the divine, from the beginning to the end of time, when the sinful inhabitants of the one will be punished eternally in hell, while the purified souls of the citizens of the other will enjoy the blissfulness of eternal life in heaven. Books I-X, are devoted to the double task of (1) answering those impious pagans who accused the Christians of being responsible for the calamities which befell Rome as a result of barbarian invasions, and (2) attacking the polytheistic religion in its three aspects, as distinguished by Varro, that is: The mythical or fabulous (represented by pagan poets and actors in the theaters), the political or civic (represented by pagan priests and priestesses in the temples and oracles), and the physical or natural (represented by pagan philosophers and students in the schools). Augustine's basic charge is that, compared to the Christian God, the pagan gods are incapable of bestowing advantages even in this life, let alone the eternal happiness of the life after.

And this, if I am not mistaken, will be the most difficult part of my task, and will be worthy of the loftiest argument; for we must then enter the lists with the philosophers, not the mere common heard of philosophers, but the most renowned, who in many points agree with ourselves, as regarding the immortality of the soul, and that the true God created the world, and by His providence rules all He has created. But as they differ from us on other points, we must not shrink from the task of exposing their errors, that, having refuted the gainsaying of the wicked with such ability as God may vouchsafe, we may assert the city of God, and true piety, and the worship of God, to which alone the promise of true and everlasting felicity is attached.³⁶

The philosophers whom Augustine has in mind are the Platonists, especially Porphyry, whose divergent views he will artfully explore in order to achieve his stated apologetic goals.

36. Dods' translation.

In this connection, the perceptive reader of the DcD cannot fail to notice that Augustine praises Porphyry highly for his improvement upon both Plato and Plotinus with regard to the destiny of the soul. This improvement was welcome to the Father of the Church, not only because it seemed to bring Platonism closer to the Christian doctrine, but also because it was a clear indication that even the admired Platonic philosophy needed to be completed at certain points by the truth of the Scripture, e.g.:

Plato said in writing³⁷ that after death souls of men return to earth in a circle and pass even into bodies of animals. This theory was held by Plotinus also, the teacher of Porphyry, but Porphyry was right to reject it. He held that human souls return to earth and enter human bodies, not indeed those they had, but new and different ones.³⁸

Despite this improvement, the Platonic doctrine is still not as good as the orthodox Christian doctrine which holds that, as Augustine put it, "souls return once to their own bodies."³⁹

In addition to this, according to Augustine who seems to have misunderstood Plato on this point, Porphyry made another and even greater correction of the traditional Platonic doctrine when he taught that "the soul, once cleansed from all evil and finally joined to the Father, will never suffer again the evils of this world."⁴⁰ Of this Augustine approved, of course, and rejoiced to find in Porphyry a "Platonist adopting a different view from Plato's and a better one. Mark him well. He saw what Plato failed to see."⁴¹ This is certainly high praise for Porphyry, but the shrewd African used it to show that the Christian view, which he advocated, is even better, since it is a combination of what is best in Platonism as represented by Plato and Porphyry. If Porphyry is correct that the cleansed soul will remain united with the Supreme God forever, this is good news. For it means that something which had a beginning in time, that is, the state of the perfected soul's bliss, will have no end in time. And if so, the Christian view that the human soul, though created in time, is destined to live forever should not have offended the Platonists, in Augustine's view, who insisted that whatever has a beginning in time must also have an end in time.⁴²

37. *Phaedrus* 249B; *Phaedo* 81E; *Timaeus* 42C; and *Republic* 618A.

38. DcD X. 30.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

42. On this see the well balanced study of E. Teselle, "Porphyry and Augustine," *Augustinian Studies* V (1974): 113-147.

What Augustine seems to forget is that, from a Platonic point of view, the ultimate return of a soul to its Fatherland simply ends the soul's adventure into the material world. Thus, if that which had a beginning in time (*kathodos psyches*) came to an end in time (*anodos psyches*), all is well and as it should be, Neoplatonically speaking. But Augustine is in search of a way to combine what he thinks is best in Porphyry and Plato so that he may reach the correct Christian view of the resurrection and immortalization of the human body as well. He writes:

And, hence, if Plato had given Porphyry the truth which he saw, that is, that the souls of the just and wise when cleansed will return to human bodies, and again, if Porphyry had given Plato the truth which he saw, that holy souls would never return to the wretched state of a corruptible body, so that one man no longer held just one view, but both men held the two views together, I think that they would have seen the logical conclusion, that souls return to bodies and that they receive bodies in which they can be happy and immortal.⁴³

Augustine should have known that neither Porphyry nor any other genuine Platonist would agree with him that from the acceptance of the premise of the blissful state of the soul followed "the logical conclusion" of a resurrected body! On the contrary, these philosophers were convinced that, as Socrates had stated in *Phaedo* and Porphyry repeated it, in Augustine's words, "*ut beata sit anima, corpus esse omne fugiendum.*"⁴⁴ Augustine was well aware that the pagan adversaries, especially Porphyry, had questioned and mocked with contempt the Christian claim about resurrected bodies. Echoing the Porphyrian question about the fish and fishermen endlessly consuming each other and about his assertion that even God cannot do the impossible of restoring the original body,⁴⁵ Augustine resorted to the omnipotence of God once again, and to the authority of the Bible arguing as follows:

Even if it had utterly perished, and no substance of his remained in any of the nature's hiding-places, the Almighty would restore it from any source He might choose. But since we have the statement of the Truth when it says: 'A hair of your head shall not perish,' it is absurd to think that while a

43. DcD XXII. 27.

44. DcD XXII. 26. "In order for the soul to be happy, it must avoid any contact with the body" (translation mine). This maxim is not characteristically Porphyrian, as Augustine believes, but a commonplace among Platonists going back to *Theaetetus* 176A.

45. Fragment 94 (Makar. IV 24).

man's hair cannot perish, so much flesh wasted and consumed by hunger could perish.⁴⁶

At another point Augustine refers to Porphyry's criticism of the wisdom of Christ, as portrayed by the evangelists, who after his resurrection chose to appear to Mary Magdalene, instead of appearing to the Roman Senate, which would certainly have saved his followers much hardship.⁴⁷ But for the Bishop of Hippo:

God permitted this [the persecutions] in order to establish and consecrate the full number of martyrs, that is, of witnesses to the truth, who were instruments to demonstrate that all bodily ills must be endured in loyalty to the cause of religion and to spread the truth. Porphyry must have seen all this and thought that this path would shortly be destroyed by such persecutions and therefore was not the universal way to the liberation of the soul.⁴⁸

This brings us to the central question of the path, the *via universalis*, which Porphyry had rejected as impossible on historical grounds, while Augustine accepted it on the authority of the Scriptures.⁴⁹ He argues as follows:

This then is the universal path to the liberation of the soul, that is, a path granted to all nations universally by divine compassion. Even Porphyry adopted this view when he said that the gift of God had not yet been acquired and had not come to his attention.⁵⁰

Once again by "universal" Porphyry and Augustine meant two different things. For the Hellenic philosopher, it does not make sense to speak of the Christian way to salvation as universal, since millions and millions of people have lived and died or will live and die without having even heard the *evangelium*.⁵¹ But, for the

46. DcD XXII. 20.

47. Fragment 64 (Makar. II 14).

48. DcD X. 32.

49. But the authority of the Scripture is occasionally ambiguous, as is evident from DcD X 24. See Wiesen's comments, 1968, 356-7.

50. DcD X. 32. See also Teselle, *op. cit.*, J. O'Meara, "Indian Wisdom and Porphyry's Search for a Universal Way," in *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought*, R. Baine Harris, ed., (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1982), and P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, Berkeley: UC Press, 1969), especially pp. 106 and 116-119.

51. This objection seems to touch upon the fairness of God's arbitrary intervention in human history. How could belief in Christ become the criterion of salvation or damnation for those who did not have a chance to hear his salvatory message? Augustine had to address questions like this in epistle 102.

Church Father, the way is called "universal" either because, "This is, I repeat, the universal way of liberation for those who believe" (which, of course, excludes the non-believers who are the majority); or because it purifies the entire man, soul and body, "For we need not seek out one kind of purification for the part that Porphyry calls intellectual, and another for that part he calls spiritual, and still another for the body;" since "The Lord Christ is the principle by whose incarnation we are purified."⁵² Augustine's preference for Scriptural authority, dogmatic simplification, and stubborn opposition to Porphyry's subtle distinctions are apparent in these statements making the gap between them unbridgeable.⁵³

Evidently echoing Porphyry's many jibes regarding the doctrine of incarnation, Augustine deplores the Platonist's blindness. In an illuminating passage, he attempts to explain Porphyry's failure of recognizing the principal importance of Christ's mediation as caused by his pride and lack of humility:

Indeed, he despised him in the very flesh that he took upon him in order to be sacrificed for our cleansing. It is obvious that pride blinded Porphyry to the great and sacred truth, the same pride that our great and gracious Mediator cast down by his humility . . . But our Platonist did not recognize him as the principle, for if he did, he would recognize him as the cleanser.⁵⁴

Passages like the above clearly indicate the gap which separates the faithful heart of the Church Father, which is filled with the light of revelation and feels sorry for those who are still blind, from the critical mind of the philosopher which rejects any sort of consolation which does not stand to reason.

Commenting on Jesus' saying, according to Luke 5:31, "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick," Porphyry had urged the healthy Greco-Romans to stay away from the Christian baptistries. Echoing this, Augustine alerts the philosopher, the lover of wisdom, to the true wisdom which he should love:

. . . whereas if you had loved them truly and faithfully, you would have come to know "Christ the virtue [power] of God and the wisdom of God," instead of been so puffed up with

52. DcD X. 32.

53. The most used and perhaps the strongest argument on the side of the apologists was the great success of the Christian message. On pragmatic grounds, this argument could not be assailed before the appearance and spectacular success of the new faith of Islam.

54. DcD X. 24.

pride in your own empty knowledge that you recoiled in shock from his supremely health-giving humility . . . This is what they despise as foolish and weak, as if they were wise and strong by virtue of their own excellence. But this is the grace that heals the weak who do not proudly boast of a false happiness of their own, but rather confess humbly their genuine misery.⁵⁵

In this passage, the opposition between the Christian sacramental and the philosophical approaches to human happiness (*eudaimonia*) as the crown of excellence (*arete*) is clear. What the Platonists had viewed as a personal and difficult achievement to be reached only by those who were willing and able to undergo strict philosophical self-discipline, had become simply a gift from God for popular Christianity, a matter of grace and faithful acceptance of the right Saviour of the soul as well as the body. What Augustine saw as a generous and democratic way of leading every simple soul out of the misery of sin and towards finding rest in the forgiving Father, was perceived by Porphyry as dangerous demagoguery pandering to the laziness of the many. Neoplatonism could not compete with Christianity at that level.

Augustine would certainly have been delighted if a pure Platonist, like Porphyry, had accepted Christ as the Saviour. But he was convinced that the philosopher's pride prevented him from seeing the light and joining the Church. He also knew that even in the fifth century many men were following Porphyry in defying the Church and the Christian emperors who found it necessary to condemn Porphyry's book for a second time in 448. It is in this light that we should read Augustinian exclamations, like the one that follows, in order to grasp the full impact of its sense of urgency:

Oh, if only you could have recognized the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord and especially his incarnation, whereby he put on the soul and the body of a man, you might have seen that this is the supreme example of grace. But what am I to do? I know that it is useless for me to speak to one who is dead; but that applies only to you. There are those who hold you in high esteem and affection through love of wisdom . . . and I address my urgent appeal rather to them than to you, but in your name and perhaps not without success.⁵⁶

There is no need to continue citing passage after passage where Augustine echoes or indirectly responds to Porphyry's critique of

55. DcD X. 28.

56. DcD X. 29.

Christianity. For it should be clear by now that, no matter what else might have been Augustine's purpose in writing DcD, the response to Porphyry's central criticisms certainly was a considerable part of it. Augustine, then, should be included in that illustrious group of Church Fathers who saw in Porphyry the primary adversary of their faith and fought back. The recognition of this fact may throw fresh light into such an old riddle as the Platonism of Augustine.⁵⁷

In this light, Augustine would appear to have learned at the end of his life to be aware of Platonists, like Porphyry, and Platonism itself as being radically incompatible with the faith demanding, and mystically revealed, grace of God in Christ. Thus, when we read the *Retractationes*, we should pay attention to his confessional regret, that he had overpraised the Platonists, to whom he now refers as *impios homines*; who committed *errores magnos*; and against whom *defenda est Christiana doctrina*.⁵⁸

Furthermore, since the echoes of Porphyry's critique of the Church as found in DcD are similar to those advanced by the pagan philosopher in the fragments of Makarius Magnes book, *Apocriticus* or *Monogenes*, it follows that Harnack's hypothesis, which identifies this pagan philosopher with Porphyry, receives further confirmation by Augustine's indirect testimony. If so, Professor Barnes, and those who have followed him, must be wrong in rejecting off hand Harnack's well-tested hypothesis without having anything substantial to replace it.⁵⁹

57. In this light, claims such as O'Meara's, *op. cit.*, (1959), "the nature of the *De civitate dei* as an apologetic work reaching its climax in the refutation of the *Philosophy from the Oracles* is revealed" will have to be radically revised. Evidently, Augustine's real target in his *magnum opus* was not Porphyry the defender of paganism but Porphyry the critic of Christianity. But O'Meara is not alone in missing this important point. He is in the company of almost all those mentioned in note No. 11 above.

58. *Retractationes*. I, 24C, "*Laus quoque ipsa, qua Platonem vel Platonicos seu Academicos philosophos tantum extuli, quantum impios homines non oportuit, non immerito mihi displicuit, praesertim contra quorum errores magnos defendenda est Christiana doctrina.*"

59. Barnes, *op. cit.*, (who is faithfully followed by Meredith, *op. cit.*, and A. Smith, "Porphyrian Studies Since 1913," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II, 36.2, W. Haase, ed., Berlin: W. De Gruyter, 1987), simply repeats, without acknowledgement, some of Crafer's arguments, *op. cit.*, by which he tried to prove that Harnack's hypothesis is vulnerable in its claim that in Makarius' fragments we have Porphyry's *ipsissima verba*. Crafer thought that, although the content is Porphyrian, the words are Hierocles'. Demarolle, *op. cit.*, thinks that they are Julian's. Neither is convincing. The difference in style between the directness of Julian, the verbosity of Hierocles and the philological pointedness, the philosophical rigor, and the biting irony which characterize Porphyry's style, seems to

Last but not least, our discussion has shown that the conflict between Hellenism and Christianity was basically an opposition between polytheistic tolerance, inclusiveness, and pluralism, on the one hand, and monotheistic intolerance, exclusiveness, and dogmatism, on the other. The importance of this opposition and its relevance to us has been recognized by sensitive men one of whom I would like to quote here:

This sort of monotheistic complacency is becoming more and more difficult to maintain as we become more and more vividly aware of other religious traditions than the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic, notably that of India . . . I shall do so by considering one or two points about the most powerful polytheism within our own tradition, the Hellenic, which has influenced that tradition in many important ways. The Greeks in the end found it perfectly possible to combine this with monotheism, to believe in God without ceasing to believe in the gods . . . But, if we find, as I have done, that the polytheists have a good deal to say to us which is relevant to the contemporary needs of which I have just been speaking; then we shall do well to keep their theology and their gods in our thoughts and in our prayers, in the way which seems appropriate to each of us. It is not by one path only that so great a mystery can be approached.⁶⁰

Porphyry would have approved wholeheartedly of the many paths open to all from which one can choose according to his ability for ascent towards the final goal which remains always the same.

VI

In retrospect, it would seem that Augustine's response to Porphyry's challenge, and his attitude to Platonism in general, is neither clear-cut nor one-sided. When he compares Porphyry to other

favor Porphyry and so do the echoes of his arguments which are to be found in DcD. Nor are Barnes' efforts to push the date of the *Kata Christianon* forward to the beginning of the fourth century more successful. For the Christians, Augustine, Jerome, and Eusebius, Porphyry is the *philosophus Siculus* who wrote against their faith from there, where he went in 268. He returned to Rome after Plotinus' death in 270. Eunapius and Ammonius do not disagree with them. Nor should Mr. Barnes. See also Bidez, *op. cit.*, 65-79, and A. Cameron, "The Date of the *Kata Christianon*," *Classical Quarterly*, XXVII (1967): 382-384.

60. A.H. Armstrong, "Some Advantages of Polytheism," *Dionysus* 5 (1981): 181-188. The author has expressed similar views in "Man in the Cosmos: A Study of Some Differences Between Pagan Neoplatonism and Christianity," in *Romanitas et Christianitas*, Studia I.H. Waszink, W. Den Boer et al., eds., (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1973).

Platonists, Augustine praises the pagan philosopher highly for his improvement of important doctrines as they had been developed by Plato and Plotinus. When he considers Porphyry as an advocate of Hellenic polytheism, Augustine tends to be critical of the philosopher who is portrayed as having betrayed lofty Platonism in order to accommodate pagan demonology. But when he looks at Porphyry as the adversary of Christianity, Augustine sees in him the most impious and blasphemous philosopher whose intellectual pride prevented him from finding true wisdom in the incarnated *Logos*, and whose anti-Christian writings led many souls astray from the one and only true path of salvation through Christ. At the end, and not at all surprisingly, the defender of Christian Orthodoxy did not hesitate to sacrifice pure Platonism and even the liberal arts for the sake of sanctifying faith.⁶¹

From his scattered remarks in *DcD*, it is evident that Augustine would be very happy if Porphyry, like Victorinus, had accepted the Christian faith or, at least, if he had been as discreet as Plotinus about Christianity. Porphyry had done neither and Augustine had to face the unpleasant fact. It is also clear that, when Augustine mentions Porphyry or refers to his arguments, he is doing so not for the sake of theoretical concerns but for practical purposes. For his target seems to have been the group of Porphyry's followers whom he wanted to convert to the cause of the Church. As a believer Augustine thought that he had found *the way* to salvation and he could not see why others were so blind as to miss it.

However, this was not the way a philosopher, like Porphyry, or his followers had elected to look at the matter. The contact with Plotinus and the study of Platonism had helped Porphyry and many others to rise above the common superstitions in search for the philosophical way which does not exclude other ways for other souls, but tolerates them by giving each his due. This openness and philosophical tolerance was perceived by the Church Father as compromising the one "true way" and, therefore, censurable. But the same spirit of tolerance has inspired many thoughtful people through the centuries with its truthfulness and nobility.

As an advocate of the Christian cause, Augustine also used a different method and strategy than those of Porphyry. While the philosopher did his best to show by pointed criticism that the Christian Scriptures were unworthy of free and rational men, Augustine tried hard, by constant appeals to the authority of those Scriptures, to open the eyes of those stubborn pagans who had been influenced by Porphyry's powerful writings. Besides, by

61. In Maurus, I, 28A, we read with astonishment: *Et quod multum tribui liberalibus disciplinis, quas multi sancti multum nesciunt; quidam etiam, qui sciunt eas, sancti non sunt.*

pointing to the popular success of the Church, Augustine hoped that the opponents would see its divine origin. Pragmatically speaking, Augustine had a point, but pragmatism can be easily abused by justifying every success regardless of how unholy the end or its means may be.

Evidently, Augustine and Porphyry were destined to oppose each other and to place their great abilities as writers in the service of the cause of Christianity and Hellenism respectively. In *DcD* we encounter certain echoes from Porphyry's criticism of Christianity which are sufficient to place Augustine among the apologists who saw in Porphyry the chief foe of their faith. It is ironic that, in spite of Porphyry's critique of the Church and Augustine's reservations about the compatibility of Christian faith and Platonic philosophy, the Byzantines succeeded in forcing the two tradition together in what came to be known as their great Helleno-Christian heritage. But this success should not blind us to the fact that for the first five centuries Hellenism and Christianity opposed each other as two radically incompatible outlooks with different answers to the quest for deliverance, dignity, tolerance, and truth. And this important historical fact is too often forgotten.⁶²

Towson State University
Maryland

62. See, for instance, *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, cited above. Characteristically, of its nineteen scholarly articles none touches upon the problematic relationship between Hellenism and Christianity.