

## The Conflict and the Applicability of the Christian and/or Pagan Identities in the Letters of Augustine

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### INTRODUCTION

In contributing to the debate on the nature of changes of the Christian world in late antiquity, some scholars have claimed that the boundaries between religious groups were blurred with shifting, in that, for instance, the identity of Christians in the late Roman world was not characterised by clear indications of religious belief, observance, and practice. After an intriguing contribution to the discussion of the Christian identity (R. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, Cambridge, 1990), more recently, interesting surveys have shown that the difference between Christians and pagans can be seen as part of a discursive binary (see, M. Kahlos, *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures, c. 360-430*, Aldershot, 2007; É. Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200-450 CE*, Ithaca and London, 2012). It is interesting to note that the North African evidences of the identity of Christians allow us to examine the question of what it meant to be a Christian. Hence, in this paper I shall confine myself to five letters of Augustine exchanged between both Dioscorus and Volusianus, in which he tried to impose his idea of the Christian code of behaviour on his correspondents, and shall seek to analyse whether or not they were Christians who would understand their identity as closely connected with those that Augustine had hoped for.

### LETTER EXCHANGE WITH DIOSCORUS

The first group of letters to be considered is *Letters* 117 and 118, the correspondence between Augustine and Dioscorus, the latter of whose prosopographical information is mostly provided by these letters. It is more than likely, in the autumn of 410, that they opened up communication by letter. Indeed, before departing Carthage where he was studying, a young native of Greece called Dioscorus wrote asking Augustine questions about the philosophical works of Cicero, in particular his *De natura deorum* and about some of his rhetorical tractates. Although the list itself is now lost, both the first letter written by Dioscorus (*Ep.* 117) and the long answer from Augustine (*Ep.* 118) are available to us. According to the second letter in particular, it becomes clear that Augustine knows Dioscorus well enough to make many references to his life and activities: a young man, still unmarried, and first studied at Rome, most likely he was

the brother of Zenobius, a friend of Augustine and to whom he dedicated one of the Cassiciacum dialogues (*De ordine*). Then, what kind of other things would be known to us?

It is interesting to note that Possidius, Augustine's friend and his biographer, classified this letter exchange into the group designated 'Against Pagans' in his *Indiculum* of Augustine's works, appended to the *Life of Augustine*. Because of the main part of *Letter 118* and Dioscorus's deep concern for pagan philosophy, some scholars have been inclined to consider him as a pagan. The communication between Augustine and such a pagan was developed on the basis of their rational behaviour, in particular of Augustine's politeness and courtesy. His response would be interpreted as an affirmation of Dioscorus's paganism and a respect for the Greco-Roman classical culture. This seems to be the same as the other pagan correspondents, for instance, Longinianus (*Ep.* 233-235), Volusianus (*Ep.* 132), and Maximus (*Ep.* 17). However, with regard to the religious affiliation of Dioscorus, Augustine explicitly mentions that Dioscorus shows a decided preference for 'Christian teaching', rather than for all others: 'you are confident that it [sc. Christian teaching] alone contains the hope of eternal salvation' (*Ep.* 118.2.11). In fact, he is quite anxious for Dioscorus to seek another way of finding the truth: his warning is given against the deviation from the way that 'he [sc. Christ] constructed who, as God, saw the weakness of our steps' (*Ep.* 118.3.22). Although it is not certain whether they met in Carthage or somewhere around there, the various activities of Dioscorus were familiar to Augustine, which included the fact that he was not a pagan.

This letter provides the detailed compendium of his views on contemporary pagan philosophy. It comprises the teachings of the Stoics, Academics, Epicureans, and Platonists. Augustine dedicates over thirty long paragraphs to answer the questions posed by the youth, despite his highly critical of 'those old, worn-out errors of many people [sc. philosophers]' (*Ep.* 118.1.7). Perhaps it might be suggested that Augustine feels real sympathy for the ambitious dilettante because of the similarity of his current status to that of his own past. He does not show any reluctance to talk about his old self, who once instructed boys in rhetoric. However, Augustine's criticism is explicit: due to the standpoint of Dioscorus, in which he is willing to shift Augustine back to his past as a professor of rhetoric, not attending to his present position as a bishop.

It is not evident to me that there is nothing improper involved in this matter [sc. Dioscorus's questions]. For my mind fails to find a proper appearance of things when I think that a bishop, torn this way and that by noisy concerns of the Church, holds himself back from all these, as if suddenly become deaf, and explains minor questions about Ciceronian dialogues to a single student. (*Ep.* 118.1.2)

The basilica of the Christians at Hippo occurred to you as the place to deposit your concerns, because there now sits in it a bishop who once sold such ideas to children. (*Ep.* 118.2.10)

In chiding his literary correspondent for the eagerness to his intellectual pursuits once shared by himself, he would rather criticise Dioscorus for placing a higher priority on

the previous identity of Augustine. Thus, although, in the lengthy reply to Dioscorus, Augustine's disapproval of the intellectual snobbery is often expressed, the central concern of this letter appears to be the hierarchical and irreversible order of the identities and commitments: Dioscorus is fully expected to reconsider its arrangement based on his religious affiliation.

#### LETTER EXCHANGE WITH VOLUSIANUS

The second group of letters to be examined is *Letters* 132, 135, and 137, the correspondence between Augustine and Volusianus, the latter of whose life and activities, and whose family members are also known to us by several documents (including *Vita Melaniae Iunioris*, in which the story of his baptism on his deathbed is told). At the time when he was living in Carthage (411-412), Volusianus received a letter from Augustine (*Ep.* 132) in 411 or 412. Then, the young aristocrat replied with a series of questions (*Ep.* 135), because of Augustine's prompt to write back to him, and Marcellinus, an imperial military officer, sent to Augustine further questions posed by Volusianus (*Ep.* 136). Soon after receiving these letters, Augustine sent a reply to Volusianus (*Ep.* 137) and responded to the questions mentioned in the previous these letters.

Augustine begins with communication from encouraging Volusianus to read the scriptures, in particular 'the letters of the apostles' (*Ep.* 132). He also prompts Volusianus to write back with many questions as arising from his reading. It is interesting to note that Augustine would choose to think about such subject through the letter writing rather than by conversing together. It may be partly because there is a difficulty in setting up a meeting schedule. Yet another reason is perhaps more important. He is willing to distance themselves away from 'the intruding presence of those who are not suited for such an undertaking and find more delight in contents of the tongue than in the enlightenment of knowledge' (*Ep.* 132). In comparison with the genuineness of the scriptures, he once again criticises 'the false beauty of rhetoric' for enticing those who are longing for the truth 'by obscure language' (*Ep.* 132). Augustine proposes, therefore, to exclude his interest in rhetoric and the audience of the dialogue, both of which are assumed to be an obstacle to focus on the spiritual matter.

Volusianus replies to the invitation from Augustine and wrote back with some questions. It is clearly admitted that, although he seems to fulfil his promise to address various questions, his main concern is to report the recent gatherings of a circle of friends in Carthage and to share the achievement in their discussions. Volusianus informs Augustine about the 'various talents and interests' of the discussants (*Ep.* 135.1). These learned friends are pagans and Roman aristocrats, with whom he has some particular interest in common. They all are comfortable talking with one another about the pleasure of rhetorical composition, the eloquence of poetry, and the great accomplishment of philosophers. Not only does he repeatedly remind Augustine of his former career as a professor of rhetoric and the education he has received: 'I speak to someone

who knows about that. ... you also taught this a little before. ...with which [sc. philosophy] you are familiar and which you yourself are accustomed to cultivate...' (*Ep.* 135.1), but further at the end of the letter, with apparently a polite and sympathetic attitude towards his position, Volusianus urges Augustine to determine their relationship from the standpoint of a group of his friends.

It is a matter of interest for your reputation that I come to know the answers to my questions, because ignorance may somehow or other be tolerated in other priests without harm to the worship of God, but when it comes to Augustine, the bishop, whatever he may happen not to know is a failing in what is right. (*Ep.* 135.2)

According to his report on the cordial meeting, one of the participants interrupts their conversation and raises a series of unsuitable questions about Christianity.

'And who is perfectly imbued with the wisdom of Christianity, who can resolve certain ambiguous points on which I am stuck and can strengthen my hesitant assent with true or probable grounds for belief?' ... 'I wonder whether the Lord and ruler of the world filled the body of an inviolate woman, whether she endured those long annoyances over ten months, and whether, though a virgin, she nonetheless had the child in the ordinary manner of giving birth and after this her virginity remained intact.' (*Ep.* 135.2)

It is noticeable that Volusianus tells Augustine about the questions raised by a friend of the circle, not about those of his own. Neither does he attempt to pose some questions about the scriptural reading, nor to communicate with Augustine about his own uncertainty as to the incarnation and the miracles Christ performed. Despite of the fact that Marcellinus writes to Augustine to make known the questions about these issues, which have 'been examined again and again' by Volusianus and his fellows in Carthage (*Ep.* 136.1), Volusianus intends to deflect the attention of the bishop away from the teachings of Christianity. Indeed, it is difficult to determine whether Volusianus was a pagan when he received the letter from Augustine. But, it is certain that, contrary to Augustine's concern for the spiritual health of the young aristocrat, Volusianus invites him to the circle of erudite friends. He explicitly prefers his own intellectual interest shared with others to the religious affiliation, the latter of which was not high on the list of priorities.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

These letters I have considered so far provide the same confirmation that, despite of the fact whether or not the correspondents of Augustine were Christians, they both would rather communicate with Augustine from the standpoint of their views of his former career as a professor of rhetoric. Although Augustine himself have already decided to make another arrangement for his social position, both Dioscorus and Volusianus prefer their intellectual concern to their religious membership. It is clearly admitted that, while Augustine does not accept the view that the vertically arranged hierarchy of

social membership can be altered under certain circumstances, all do not hold the same framework. Indeed, he encourages them to regard their religious identity as their principal code of behaviour. But, his warning would not create the dramatic tension. It is probably because their religious identity is, as well as other social membership, given as a choice factor.