

THE CORPUS HERMETICUM: A MIRROR FOR THE EVOLUTION OF CHRISTIAN  
ORTHODOXY

By

CHARLES FLOWERS

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Charles Flowers

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The *Corpus Hermeticum* of Hermes Trismegistus and the Latin *Asclepius* traveled throughout the late ancient Christian world, both venerated as the most ancient and praiseworthy path to enlightenment and disdained as a failed philosophy fit only for derision and censure. Having disappeared in Europe through most of the Middle Ages, the *Corpus* reemerged in Renaissance Italy with even greater authority such that Marsilio Ficino put aside his translations of Plato to address Hermes, believed to be the far more ancient philosophy.

This study traces the reactions to and uses of the *Corpus Hermeticum* during a period of emerging Christian orthodoxy in late antiquity. Augustine used the *Corpus* in the fifth century to distinguish proper Christian belief from heterodoxy, attacking man-made gods and using Hermes' words to demonstrate the false trickery of demons. Earlier Christian writers, however, were more ambivalent about the teachings of the *Corpus*. Lactantius found the demons of Hermes to be enemies of God but appealed to the mythic author as an authority to prove the superiority of Christian faith over demonic influence. Julius Firmicus Maternus, a pagan astrologer converted to Christianity, used the *Corpus* and the authority of Hermes in both his astrological and later anti-pagan works.

Through an examination of these variant interpretations, the Hermetic tradition can be used as a tool for probing not only the emergence of Christian orthodoxy, but the formation of borders between pagan and Christian and the growing power of orthodoxy. The *Corpus Hermeticum* reveals a syncretistic interpenetration of Egyptian, Greek, and early Christian theology and cosmology. Held up as a mirror to ongoing intellectual transformation, the unchanging *Corpus* reflects the changing perspectives of both pagan and Christian thinkers during critical moments of cultural and religious evolution.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In 1463, Cosimo de' Medici came to his translator, Marsilio Ficino, telling him to interrupt his translation of the works of Plato because a far more important manuscript had appeared in Florence. The works of Hermes Trismegistus, believed to be far more ancient and authoritative than Plato, or even Moses, required immediate attention.<sup>1</sup> Plato could wait. By the time of the Renaissance, the reputation of Hermes for knowledge, piety, magic, and power had grown to such an extent that the arrival of the *Corpus Hermeticum* would help to usher in a revival of magic.<sup>2</sup> A series of eighteen treatises, the *Corpus* passed on the revealed wisdom of a man-become-god, an amalgamation of the Hellenic god Hermes (or Mercury) and the Egyptian god Thoth, a man often referred to simply as “the Egyptian”.<sup>3</sup> Over a thousand years earlier, however, in the Late Antiquity of North Africa and the Mediterranean, the *Corpus* was viewed very differently by numerous authors, as a competitive alternative to nascent Christianity. Beyond his (even then) ancient reputation, Hermes and the *Corpus* was representative of the hardening border line between pagan and Christian in the late Roman world.

### Goals

The primary goal of this study is to examine the changing conceptions of Christian orthodoxy as reflected in the use and interpretation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* by various Latin Christian writers of the fourth and fifth century. In selecting the passages and issues they chose

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 12-15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English translation with notes and introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xli. Ficino's translation contained the first fourteen treatises and the *Asclepius*. Additional treatises were added in the sixteenth century. All quoted portions of the *Hermetica* are taken from this Copenhaver reference. References will site the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the treatise number as referenced by Copenhaver, and the page number. The *Asclepius* does not have a treatise number and will be referenced as *Asclepius*.

to address, Late Antique Christian authors presented particular views of an evolving doctrine. Pre-Nicene theologians like Tertullian appealed to Hermes as an ancient authority who could support individual concepts like the survival of the soul after death.<sup>4</sup> Lactantius found in Hermes not only a prophecy of the coming of Christianity, but broad support for Christian doctrine on the Son and the created world.<sup>5</sup> The pre- and post-conversion writings of Firmicus Maternus demonstrate how ideas within the *Corpus* began to enter Christian orthodoxy contemporaneously with the growing intolerance of a religion newly ascendant in the political world. With increasing conflict in the Church over doctrinal issues, the syncretism present in the *Corpus* became grounds for attack.<sup>6</sup> In the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea, descriptions of the “demiurge” and the implications of a second created god found in the *Corpus* were no longer acceptable. Marcellus of Ancyra attacked the theology of the Arians, claiming the Eusebian Logos to be a heresy inspired by Hermes. By the time of Augustine’s assault on the *Corpus* in 417ce, the demons of Hermes, instructors in the magical arts, had become the embodiment of eternal misery and the deceivers of humanity. The Bishop of Hippo would find ample support for his harsh treatment of the pagan gods in the growing body of legislation against paganism, soon to be compiled in the Theodosian Code.<sup>7</sup> Unlike earlier theologians, Augustine found that the theological concepts espoused in the *Corpus Hermeticum* could have few redeeming qualities. They were antithetical to his theology of mediation and directly contradicted the

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<sup>4</sup> Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 198. Fowden notes that Tertullian was the first African Christian to quote directly from the *Hermetica* in support of the transmigration of souls.

<sup>5</sup> Lactantius deals extensively with the *Asclepius* in the original Greek in the *Divine Institutes*. See Book 1, Ch 6 for Hermes’ knowledge of the One God; Book 2, Ch 15 on the origin of demons and Ch 16 for the protection from demons available to the faithful; Book 4, Ch 6 for the Son of God according to Hermes and Ch 9 for the Logos.

<sup>6</sup> Fowden, 208-209. See also note 79, this page, for the Marcellus of Ancyra reference to Eusebius and Hermes.

importance of the nature and role of Christ which would soon be taken up at the Council of Ephesus in 431ce.

A secondary goal is to examine more broadly the formation of “religion” in general.<sup>8</sup> This conversation will necessarily be limited, given the scope of this paper, but will act as a way to introduce a theoretical framework which will provide additional questions to explore in the sources. Daniel Boyarin recommends to “begin with the texts or assemblages to understand” and that “theory is a way to engage with problems in texts and for generating problems.”<sup>9</sup> Following this recommendation, my concluding remarks will show that as a shared document between Christian authors the *Corpus Hermeticum* can be used to examine the underlying social and philosophical basis of the Late Antique world. The uses of the *Corpus* presented here provide concrete examples for the theoretical definitions of symbolic power and the emergence of heresy. Under the auspices of the Roman Empire, Christianity was in the process of redacting its core texts and determining its doctrinal course. The confused and sometimes self-contradictory treatises of the *Corpus* demonstrate where a similar process of pagan identity formation failed completely in the shadow of Christian self-definition, despite the best efforts of Iamblichus to define a pagan religion, or Julian to promote it.<sup>10</sup> The first through fifth centuries witnessed this

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<sup>7</sup> *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, ed. Clyde Pharr (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952). See in particular Book 9 for magic and Book 11 for pardons (or lack thereof). See also Book 16, Title 5 for Christian heretics and Title 10 for laws curtailing paganism.

<sup>8</sup> Éric Rebillard discusses the cautious use of patristic citations by Augustine as a new fourth-century style supporting Christian argument beyond that provided by Scripture. The use of Hermes and the writings attributed to him across these early Christian writers suggests a parallel development in the use of pagan citations for Christian argument. As a third goal, examining the development of Hermetic citation as a particular style of discourse along these lines has not been possible in this paper. Éric Rebillard, “A New Style of Argument in Christian Polemic: Augustine and the Use of Patristic Citations,” in *The Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8:4 (2000): 559-578.

<sup>9</sup> Conversations with Dr. Daniel Boyarin during his presentation at the University of Florida in the Spring of 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Iamblichus was a third-century Neoplatonist who relied heavily on the *Hermetica* in his construction of a coherent set of pagan practices and doctrines in *De Mysteriis*. Iamblichus is also the source envisioned by Emperor Julian the Apostate in his attempt to revive paganism against the “Galileans.” See Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the*

“invention of Christianity as a religion” while the *Corpus Hermeticum* fell first into a middle ground and later into pure pagan error, reflecting the changing definition of “orthodoxy”.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Commentators on the *Corpus***

When held up as a mirror to ongoing intellectual transformation, the uses of and responses to the *Corpus* reflect the changing perspectives of Christian thinkers during critical moments of cultural and religious evolution.<sup>12</sup> For Lactantius, convincing pagans that Christianity was a short step from a monotheistic belief in the One god to the proper worship of the Christian God was a primary goal of his *Divine Institutes*. But these beliefs (particularly his acceptance of the concept of the Logos as a second god) were found to be incomplete at the Council of Nicaea. The writings of Firmicus Maternus, a recent convert, reflect the mind of an educated Roman elite during a period of hardening of Roman law against paganism in general. Where earlier scholars may have seen inconsistencies in Firmicus, the image of Firmicus reflected by the *Corpus* is that of a zealous convert abandoning pagan ideas and embracing the theological possibilities of a redemptive Christ, as well as the coercive power of the state. This same brand of internal consistency is particularly evident in the case of Augustine. In analyzing the encounter between the Bishop of Hippo and Apuleius in *City of God*, Vincent Hunink asks not only why Augustine would devote such space to the “innocent little speech” about demons in *De Deo Socratis*, but he also wonders at the misrepresentation of Apuleius’s views and the

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*Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (The Pennsylvania University Press: University Park, PA, 1995) for the definitive treatment of his philosophy and Iamblichus. See *De Mysteriis*, ed. Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, & Jackson P. Hershbell (Leiden: Brill, 2004) for a recent translation with facing English and Greek text.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 202.

<sup>12</sup> This thesis is the first portion of a substantial project intended to trace the uses of the *Corpus* (and Hermetica in general) through Late Antiquity, providing a reference for a broad selection of authors that reacted to the *Corpus*. The period introduced here, from approximately 200ce to 450ce, encompass a Master’s Thesis. Additional work with the *Corpus* in paganism, Islam, Medieval Europe, and the Early Modern Period will constitute the chapters of a future PhD dissertation.

exclusion of the positive aspects of Apuleian theory.<sup>13</sup> It is the contention of this paper that Augustine employs both Apuleius and the *Corpus* together in a single logical construction to discredit pagan Neoplatonism and strengthen his Christian alternative. William C. Grese has traced points of contact between the thirteenth treatise in the *Corpus* and early Christian and Gnostic literature, detailing each, in a line-by-line exploration of the work. As he himself notes, however, his study is only a beginning of the investigation into the history of the Hermetic tradition, and indeed is limited to only a single treatise.<sup>14</sup> To my knowledge, there have been no other examinations of early Christian appropriations of or objections to the *Corpus* along the lines of either Grese's meticulous methodology or the broad-based approach which I explore in this paper.

Lactantius, Firmicus Maternus, and Augustine use the *Corpus* to define a border between pagan and Christian, and over the century and a half separating their writings that border becomes not only clearer but exclusionary. Boyarin's designation of the late fourth and early fifth centuries as the critical period not only for the separation of Christian and Jewish faiths, but the solidification of "religion" in its modern definition is further supported by the evidence presented here. Lactantius affords a glimpse of Christianity in transition in that he found easy parallels between his Christian faith and pagan philosophy. Monotheism was not a wholly owned subsidiary of Christianity, but would become so as Christians employed their symbolic capital to create and shape other groups. Later in the century, the lines between these groups were further defined. Firmicus Maternus may have been turning his pen from pagan pursuits to Christian polemics for political gain under a new regime, but the concepts he drew upon for his

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<sup>13</sup>Vincent Hunink, "Apuleius, qui nobis Afris afer est notior': Augustine's polemic against Apuleius in *De Civitate Dei*," in *Scholia: Studies in Classical Antiquity*, 12 (2003): 82-95.

<sup>14</sup> William C. Grese, *Corpus Hermeticum XIII and Early Christian Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1979).

attacks demonstrate the process of a shared cultural heritage undergoing forceful separation. By the time of Augustine, that process was largely complete. In his quotations from the *Corpus*, Augustine can afford to be apologetic on behalf of Hermes since the danger posed by pagan ideas of divinity has passed. The similarities found by Lactantius become dangerous errors to be stamped out by Firmicus and then, finally, merely mistakes of a pre-Christian people as seen by Augustine.

## CHAPTER 2 LACTANTIUS

Traveling from North Africa, Lactantius had arrived in Nicomedia in 302ce to take up an endowed chair of rhetoric, summoned to the court by Diocletian as an instructor in Latin and editor of official Latin writings.<sup>1</sup> R. M. Ogilvie has produced an exhaustive comparative study of Lactantius and his literary quotations, concluding that Lactantius received a typical classical education but had very little access to original works in his most productive writing years.<sup>2</sup> However, Ogilvie does conclude that Lactantius not only knew the Hermetica well but may have had direct access to the texts themselves.<sup>3</sup> Lactantius quotes most often from a Greek version of the *Asclepius*, which he calls the *Summo Perfectus (Perfect Discourse)* that is no longer extant and was more accurate than the Latin *Asclepius*. He also quotes from Hermetic works beyond the *Corpus Hermeticum* which are seen later only in Stobaeus and Cyril of Alexandria. His access to these texts is in keeping with their general spread through the eastern Empire. Iamblichus, a student of Porphyry, relied heavily on Hermes Trismegistus in his *On the Mysteries*, written in 300ce to support his program to create a unified pagan religion.<sup>4</sup> Lactantius's classical and even Biblical quotations are more likely from *florilegia*, betraying the central position that Hermes took in his own personal philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. M. Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 1. See also H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 207-212.

<sup>2</sup> Ogilvie, 4-6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-36.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius & Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 66-67.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

## **Late Antique Culture and the *Divine Institutes***

It was during the palace lectures of the following winter of 303ce in Nicomedia that the toleration of Christian practices ended and the ‘Great Persecution’ began.<sup>6</sup> As a recent convert to Christianity, a teacher, and an accomplished rhetor, Lactantius wrote the *Divine Institutes* from 305-310ce to counter the arguments made during those lectures by the pagan philosopher Porphyry, a figure who will appear frequently in this discussion, and the vehemently anti-Christian governor of Bithynia, Hierocles.<sup>7</sup> Lactantius had found that “there have been wanting among us (Christians) suitable trained and skillful teachers who would vehemently and keenly refute public errors.”<sup>8</sup> Hermes appears in all key sections of the *Institutes* including discussions on false worship and how it originated, true wisdom and the resulting true worship, and how this worship leads to a happy life. Throughout these books, he employed the authority of Hermes Trismegistus and ideas from the *Corpus Hermeticum* to support a Christian interpretation of the One God, attempting to bolster support for the acceptance of Christianity. Lactantius’s *Institutes* not only reveal a very fluid border between Christian concepts and those of the *Corpus*, but also reflect the most heated theological discussions of the times, including the divine nature of God, the creation of humanity, and how humanity can come to know God. Writing within a century of the most probable date of publication for many of the Hermetic treatises, Lactantius demonstrates that ideas current to pagan monotheism enabled Christian apologists to find and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 5. Digeser is clearly convinced that the pagan philosopher whom Lactantius addresses in the *Divine Institutes* is Porphyry, although this attribution has not been conclusively proven to the satisfaction of some Late Antique historians. See her complete argument in Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, “Lactantius, Porphyry, and the Debate over Religious Toleration,” in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 88 (1998): 129-146 for a thorough comparative analysis of the *Divine Institutes* and Porphyry’s *Philosophy from Oracles*.

<sup>8</sup> For Lactantius, see *The Divine Institutes, Books I-VII*, trans. Mary Francis McDonald in *The Fathers of the Church, Vol. 49* (Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 330. All references to the *Divine Institutes* are taken from this translation. Book, chapter, and page numbers will be included.

exploit common ground with pagans.<sup>9</sup> Focusing on shared monotheistic issues, Lactantius also finds Hermetic support for attacks on Roman polytheism. The manner in which the *Corpus* was used either to enhance or support key Christian concepts, particularly those issues taken up at the early Ecumenical Councils, will be a key theme to my examination.

Lactantius finds support for his conception of God when Hermes “vouches for the majesty of the supreme and single God and he calls Him by the same names which we use: Lord and Father.”<sup>10</sup> This Hermetic God is “greater than any name” and is “nameless or rather he is all-named since he is one and all,”<sup>11</sup> and Lactantius agreed that “because He is always one, the proper name is God.”<sup>12</sup> However, it was not the oneness or namelessness of God that troubled pagans like Porphyry;<sup>13</sup> instead it was the Christian assertion that Christ, a human being, was also the same ineffable One God. But here too, Lactantius could find ample support in the Hermetica. The *Asclepius* explains that “God, made a god next after himself;”<sup>14</sup> Lactantius’s translation of the next sentences reflects the same idea: “He made this one, the first and only and one ... He was delighted with him, and loved him perfectly as his own son.”<sup>15</sup> The first treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum* relates that “the lightgiving word who comes from mind [which is God the Father] is the son of god” and that “they are not divided from one another for their union

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<sup>9</sup> There is very little evidence available for the exact dating of Hermetic texts including the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Generally accepted dating places their creation between the late first and late third centuries. See Fowden, 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* I.6, 32. Copenhaver, *Corpus Hermeticum* II.17, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Copenhaver, *Corpus Hermeticum* V.10, 20 and *Asclepius*.20, 78.

<sup>12</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* I.6, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire*, 5-7.

<sup>14</sup> Copenhaver, *Asclepius* 8, 71.

<sup>15</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, IV.6, 256. Reiterated in his *Epitome*.42.

is life.”<sup>16</sup> Here Lactantius found support for the idea of a son of God, consubstantial with the Father, who also matched the Neoplatonic and Christian conception of the *Logos*, the divine word of God embodied in a man. Lactantius used the *Corpus* to show that pagan and Christian were not nearly as far apart in their beliefs as the polemic Porphyry may have presumed.

By using the *Hermetica* as a source of support, Lactantius positioned himself squarely in an already existent middle ground between pagan and Christian beliefs. Further evidence for the existence of such a middle ground can be found in the monotheistic cult of *Theos Hypsistos* which had spread throughout Asia Minor during the third and fourth centuries. This “greatest God” is found in both the Old Testament and in oracular inscriptions from Lycia and bears striking resemblance to the description of the Hermetic god: “Born of itself, untaught, without a mother, unshakeable, not contained in a name, known by many names, dwelling in fire, this is god.”<sup>17</sup> Stephen Mitchell argues that older scholarship which focuses on distinguishing ‘pagan’ from ‘Jewish’ uses of this name for God is mistaken. Instead, he favors the explanation that the cult “had room for pagans and for Jews” with the cult acting as a “seed-bed into which Jewish and Christian theology could readily be planted.”<sup>18</sup> The well-developed Jewish theology allowed the cult to appeal not just to ordinary people, but to the highly-educated, Neoplatonic philosophers whom Lactantius was targeting.<sup>19</sup> Lactantius himself did not let this cult go unnoticed. There are only two written sources in Late Antiquity which quote these three lines in Greek; one is the fifth-century *Theosophy of Tübingen*, the other is the *Divine Institutes*.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Copenhaver, *Corpus Hermeticum* I, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Mitchell, “The Cult of Theos Hypsistos between Pagans, Jews, and Christians,” in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 86.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 115 and 128.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 86. Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* I.7, 35.

Lactantius did not have to cross a well-defined boundary either for evidence of monotheistic beliefs or for receptive groups who might accept Christian ideas. Although Lactantius finds a series of helpful comparisons with the Hermetic god and Theos Hypsistos, his conception of the Christian God is clearly binitarian, almost completely lacking any concept of a Holy Spirit. Since the trinity itself is not addressed until the Council of Constantinople in 381, modern critiques of his theological position neither weaken Lactantius's Christian conviction nor endanger his ultimate goal of pagan conversion. Hermeticism helps to securely site Lactantius within the broad territory of Late Antique religious thought since it is not his Christianity which is in doubt. Instead, it is the anachronistic attempt to clearly delineate pagan from Christian (or Jew) which must be abandoned to allow for the interaction of a broad class of monotheistic beliefs as seen in the sources.<sup>21</sup>

### **The One God of Lactantius**

Seeking to prove to potential monotheistic pagan converts that the Christian version of the One God was not just identical, but superior, to the One God of the Platonists, the *Corpus* further afforded him the opportunity to attack polytheism. Lactantius brings up the testimony of the Sibyls and Hermes not only for support of Christian concepts, but also as proof that the pagan gods are nothing more than ancient human beings who achieved renown. In Book I, Chapter VIII he asserts that since the pagan tales of the birth of Apollo, Mercury, and Hercules involved a father and mother; that they were simply men.<sup>22</sup> The un-created, un-nameable nature of God,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 115. Mitchell's elegant and forceful idea is worth quoting in full: "More than that it shows that the principal categories into which we divide the religious groupings of late antiquity are simply inappropriate or misleading when applied to the beliefs and practices of a significant proportion of the population of the eastern Roman empire."

<sup>22</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* I.8, 38-39. See also I.15, 64. See Lactantius, *Epitome*.2 for a succinct explanation of the limited power of the multitude of pagan gods, again proving that none of them meet the qualifications of a Christian God worthy of worship.

also supported earlier by Hermes, was foundational for his attack on the pagan gods. He claims that the gods were just powerful men from earliest history, lending their names and character to rivers, streams, and legends. “So it must not be wondered at if the names of those who gave birth to exceedingly powerful kings were assigned to heaven and earth.”<sup>23</sup> Hermes himself asserts this euhemeristic ideal by explaining that Ouranos and Kronos were his own living ancestors who had been deified after death.<sup>24</sup> For Lactantius, then, pagans are mistaken in their worship of “gods” who were only the legendary first rulers of the earth. Lactantius neither denies the existence of these beings nor does he blame the poets of the pagan literary tradition for transmitting their legend.<sup>25</sup> Lactantius simply concluded that the notion that these humans could have created the universe was wrong. From their births and deaths, the pagan gods were simply not sufficient: “I seek a God beyond whom there is nothing whatsoever, who is the fount and origin of things. Of necessity this One must exist, who established heaven itself and founded the earth.”<sup>26</sup>

Beyond the nature of God and humanity, Lactantius found affinity with Hermetic writing on how humanity could come to know a nameless God. From piety, reverence, and fear to prayer and prophecy, Hermes and Asclepius supported a Christian understanding of God, but also pointed to the superiority of Christian belief over its pagan opponents. Both Hermes and Lactantius agreed that God revealed many things while keeping others secret since “it is

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<sup>23</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, I.11, 54.

<sup>24</sup> Copenhaver, *Corpus Hermeticum* X.5, 31. See also notes on 157.

<sup>25</sup> Louis Swift, “Arnobius and Lactantius: Two Views of the Pagan Poets,” in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 96 (1965): 446-448. Swift notes the importance of Lactantius continuing to respect the pagan tradition given his goal of swaying pagans to his views.

<sup>26</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* I.11, 53.

impossible for mortal to approach the immortal.”<sup>27</sup> But the knowledge that humanity can gain of God stemmed primarily from the proper recognition of His oneness, his uniqueness. Hermes, as quoted by Lactantius, exclaims that “there is but one religion of God, and that is not to be evil,” which closely mirrors the precept from Proverbs 8:13 that “to fear Yahweh is to hate evil.”<sup>28</sup> If refraining from evil was a common value between pagan philosophy and Christianity on which Lactantius could draw, then reverence for God was the methodology he believed could bind the two disparate groups together. In the end, Lactantius’s ultimate goal for the *Divine Institutes* was an end to the Great Persecution by convincing educated pagans that they shared with Christians the same fundamental epistemology and that the Christianity as taught by Christ was the path that pagan philosophy sought.

Lactantius discusses at length the concept of reverence and piety in Book II of the *Divine Institutes*, making liberal and constant uses of Hermetic writings. Lactantius is wrestling with demons, like Firmicus Maternus and Augustine will after him, citing the same sections from Plato’s *Symposium*. His understanding of demons stems from the stories in the apocryphal *Book of Enoch* where fallen angels beget earthly powers with mortal women.<sup>29</sup> These spirits masquerade as pagan gods, deceiving magicians into seeing things that do not exist and not seeing the things that do.<sup>30</sup> Both Firmicus Maternus and later Augustine will follow Lactantius in their assessments of the role of demons, making them steadily more dangerous to mankind as the century progresses. Lactantius again quotes directly from Hermes when he explains that

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<sup>27</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* II.8, 134.

<sup>28</sup> Copenhaver, *Corpus Hermeticum* XII.23, 48, Proverbs 8:13. Quoted in Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* VI.25, 468.

<sup>29</sup> As with Arius, Rabbinic commentary on the *Book of Enoch* is another avenue of exploration defining the shared culture examined here.

<sup>30</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* II.16, 156. See also the discussion below on Firmicus Maternus and *De Errore* Ch. 26. Firmicus very clearly mirrors Lactantius’s judgment on demonic deception, as will Augustine.

“reverence is the knowledge of God.”<sup>31</sup> Later, in Book V, he acknowledges justice as the greatest virtue and credits the source of justice to piety, or knowledge of God, once again referencing Hermetic arguments from Book II.

If it is piety to know God, and this is the highest form of this acquaintance that you may cultivate, certainly he does not know justice who does not hold to the religion of God. For how can he know that (justice) itself who is ignorant of where it comes to be?<sup>32</sup>

Lactantius credits Plato for understanding justice, though he failed to overthrow the false worship of pagan gods; moreover, he claims that Socrates went to his death because he was unable to complete the process. Here Lactantius seems to admit the possibility that Socrates could have initiated “Christianity” without Christ. This possibility follows from Lactantius’s focus on Christ as a teacher, a focus that would be significantly diminished by the soteriological concepts at the heart of the Council of Nicaea and later highlighted by Firmicus Maternus. There are many references throughout the *Corpus Hermeticum* supporting these ideas of reverence, piety, and knowledge of God. For Hermes, “the vice of the soul is ignorance” but “the virtue of the soul, by contrast, is knowledge; for one who knows is good and reverent and already divine.”<sup>33</sup> Hermes himself, after receiving his divine understanding, goes out into the world “proclaiming to mankind the beauty of reverence and knowledge,” sounding much like a missionary proselytizing.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* II.15, 155 quoting from the *Corpus Hermeticum* X.4, 28. “Reverence is knowledge of god, and one who has come to know god, filled with all good things, has thoughts that are divine and not like those of the multitude.” The longer section shows some of the exclusivity inherent in the Hermetic writings which Augustine will take issue with later, supporting the more universal approach of a Christian Church. See also Copenhaver’s notes 151-152 for similar quotations from Cicero’s *On the Nature of the Gods*, whom Lactantius also cites positively.

<sup>32</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* V.14, 363-364.

<sup>33</sup> Copenhaver, *Corpus Hermeticum* X.8-9, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Copenhaver, *Corpus Hermeticum* I.27, 6.

Elizabeth Digeser argues that Lactantius used the *Hermetica* to defend against arguments made by Porphyry that Christianity was a new religion, and should therefore be shunned. With the support of Hermes, Lactantius could show that the Christian religion was the more ancient due to its close affinity to this fount of ancient wisdom which had informed Plato.<sup>35</sup> A careful examination of the sources lends support to this conclusion but also reveals a specific series of rhetorical arguments employed by Lactantius in his defense. Lactantius limited his selection of Hermetic quotations to broad issues concerning the nature of God, the nature of humanity, and knowledge of God. These specific issues are current to both Christian and pagan theological discussion. He was not simply arguing for the antiquity of Christian religion in these appeals but insisting on their clear applicability to the issues most important to the educated pagans and Christians of his day.

Lactantius's attempt to tap into the commonly held monotheistic beliefs represented by the Hermetic writings (and the cult of *Theos Hypsistos*) must necessarily occupy a more central position than whether or not he is representative of other Christian theologians. His God was still close to humanity, ineffable and without name, but nonetheless much closer to humankind than the increasingly esoteric philosophical monikers soon to be applied to him at upcoming Ecumenical Councils. Lactantius represented a view of Christ that would quickly become unacceptable and was not adopted at the Council of Nicaea. He argued instead for a God still approachable by humanity with Christ serving as the ideal model for human behavior, a teacher and a guide. Lactantius places this "lightgiving word" into the tradition of a teacher of wisdom, like Hermes himself or like Plotinus.<sup>36</sup> Both took on the responsibility to show humanity how

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<sup>35</sup> Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire*, 90.

<sup>36</sup> Copenhaver, *Corpus Hermeticum* I.26-27, 6-7. Poimandres "joining the powers" after his instruction to Hermes and then Hermes going out into the world to teach.

best to achieve salvation and themselves had achieved a close relationship to God during their lives on earth. Christ was therefore “constituted midway between God and man (whence the Greeks call Him Mediator) to be able to lead man to God, that is, to immortality.”<sup>37</sup> In his *Divine Institutes*, then, Lactantius placed Christ between God and humanity and demonstrated a close connection between Christian and pagan belief, but in the decades to come issues of fate and salvation would diminish the concept of Christ the Teacher in favor of Christ the Savior.<sup>38</sup>

After fleeing Nicomedia, Lactantius completed his work and ended his days in Trier at the court of the first Christian Emperor, Constantine, as the personal tutor to the Emperor’s son, Crispus.<sup>39</sup> Under the auspices of Constantine, Lactantius had suggested that shared beliefs amongst pagan and Christian would allow a compromise. The pagan literary past need not be abrogated, but subsumed under a more comprehensive interpretation of the divine nature as guided by Christ. However, even as Constantine consolidated his power by defeating his eastern rival, Licinius, to become the sole Christian ruler of the Empire, controversy had erupted in the east. The syncretic beliefs put forth by Lactantius were also found in the theology of the deacon Arius. The controversy temporarily solved at the Council of Nicaea centered on the Arian proposition that Christ the Son was subordinate to God the Father and that ‘there was when the Son was not’.<sup>40</sup> Like the second god found in the Hermetica or the Platonic demiurge, Arius placed his Logos at the pinnacle of the Creation but he was nonetheless still a member of the created order.<sup>41</sup> Arius’s concept of an intermediary allowed for a bridge between the created

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<sup>37</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* IV.25, 308.

<sup>38</sup> Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire*, 74-78.

<sup>39</sup> Ogilvie, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 195-200.

<sup>41</sup> *History of the World Christian Movement, Volume I: Earliest Christianity to 1453*, ed. Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 173-179.

world and the divine where the Son of God shared in both natures. It was the Son who had changed and suffered on the cross, not the Father. Opposed to this view were the concepts of Irenaeus who claimed for redemption to be possible God himself must be the conduit.<sup>42</sup> Some modern scholarship has proposed that Arius's view was, in fact, the more conservative and avoided the troubling question of how an immutable God could have suffered.<sup>43</sup> But in the end the Alexandrian delegation to the Council won the day, finding that Arian belief had placed Jesus in the position of a secondary god, locating the key figure in Christian theology uncomfortably close to the "demigods and heroes" of pagan mythology.<sup>44</sup> The phrase *homoousios* then entered the Creed, insisted upon by Constantine, to describe the Father and Son as consisting of one being.<sup>45</sup> This deliberately vague philosophical term was a departure from the common monotheistic "substrate" of belief shared by Lactantius, Arius, the Theos Hypsistos cult, and the Hermetica.<sup>46</sup> Another pagan converted to Christianity (by no means a theologian) demonstrates the effects of this new relationship between God and the Logos. As Christianity diverges more severely from the surrounding pagan belief system, the position of Hermes Trismegistus is diminished as well.

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<sup>42</sup> Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*, 197.

<sup>43</sup> Drake, 238. Drake cites a number of authors supporting this assertion. See the Conclusion for the theoretical support the *Corpus* lends to this idea.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>45</sup> Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*, 199.

<sup>46</sup> Further examination of congruency between Arian and Hermetic beliefs will be the subject of a future chapter of a dissertation. Separating true Arian teaching from the polemic attacks against him will entail a different form of comparative scholarship than the direct quotations I am examining here. However, Arius is vital in any attempt to recover the "substrate," the underlying environment of belief, which these four topics share and from which orthodox Christianity diverged.

### CHAPTER 3 FIRMICUS MATERNUS

The Late Antique pagan aristocrat, Firmicus Maternus, offers a unique glimpse of Christian belief during the reign of Constantine and his sons. Ten years after writing the *Matheseos Libri VIII* (*The Theory of Astrology in Eight Books*), the most complete extant work of astrology from this period, Firmicus converted to Christianity and wrote a blistering anti-pagan treatise, the *De errore profanarum religionem* (*The Error of the Pagan Religions*). Like the *Mathesis* on astrology, *De Errore* provides more detail on actual pagan practices in the mystery religions than any other work from Late Antiquity. In his transition from pagan to Christian, Firmicus maintained some pagan “doctrines” while dispensing with others. Both of his major works reveal the shared Neoplatonic and Christian view of reality that is also present in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. But some of Firmicus’s beliefs did change in relation to the *Corpus*, requiring him to refute the possible benefits of demonic interventions. It is here that elements of a crystallizing Christian orthodox doctrine can be seen in a decidedly unorthodox convert.

Although the dates of his birth and death are not known, the dates of his works and location of his writing have been firmly established. Firmicus dedicates the *Mathesis* to “Constantine the Most Great Princeps and his unconquered children, our lords and Caesars”, indicating a writing no later than the death of Constantine in 337ce.<sup>1</sup> An educated Roman citizen of senatorial rank, Firmicus claimed Sicily as his place of birth and residence.<sup>2</sup> He acquired his

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<sup>1</sup> For Firmicus Maternus, see *Ancient Astrology Theory and Practice*, trans. Jean Rhys Baum (Park Ridge, New Jersey: Noyes Press, 1975). All references to his astrological work will be referenced as follows *Mathesis* I.X.14, 30. Firmicus Maternus also discusses a solar eclipse that can be precisely dated to 334ce, providing an accepted authorship between 334-337ce. See also Firmicus Maternus, *The Error of the Pagan Religions* in *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, trans. Clarence A. Forbes (New York: Newman Press, 1970), 3-5 for a full discussion of dating. All references to this work will be referenced as *De Errore* followed by chapter and page numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis* I.Proemium.4, 11. “...the geography of Sicily where I was born and where I make my home.”

education in the classical authors and rhetoric appropriate to a member of the *vir clarissimus* rank, including training in Greek, before practicing law. As was common to the educated classes, he may have been an initiate of one or more of the mystery religions, particularly Mithraism.<sup>3</sup> As a promise to his friend Mavortius, then governor of Campania, Firmicus gathered the astrological knowledge of the Egyptians and Babylonians into the *Mathesis*; a project far larger than he expected, for which he rebuked himself after having committed to write it.<sup>4</sup> The work is a series of technical treatises on astrology, providing instruction for casting and interpreting horoscopes. The eight books begin with a defense of astrological prediction followed by detailed books describing the signs, planets, astrological houses and the technical interactions of these various elements. He also discusses the training and virtues of the astrologer including modesty, uprightness, and sobriety, with special warnings against the “shameful love of money.”<sup>5</sup> The writings betray Firmicus’s commitment to fatal determinism, which claimed that human beings were incapable of escaping the dictates of the stars, imparted at birth.<sup>6</sup> However, Firmicus takes special care to warn against casting horoscopes of the Emperor since the Emperor’s fate is reserved to God alone.<sup>7</sup> Although Firmicus does not allow for escape from this influence through Neoplatonic unification with the One, his determinism is mitigated by appeals to Socratic virtue. After his conversion a decade later, he opts for the redemptive mediation of Christ, expounded in the *De Errore*. Based on references from the Persian campaigns of Constantine to the imperial decree against pagan sacrifice, 346ce is an accepted date

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<sup>3</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *De Errore*, Introduction, 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis* I.Proemium.6-7, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., *Mathesis*, II.30, 68.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., *Mathesis* I.Proemium, pp. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., *Mathesis*, II.30, 69.

of authorship for the *De Errore*.<sup>8</sup> In his new commitment to Christianity, Firmicus takes an extreme stance against all pagan religious practices, going far beyond the growing set of laws curbing those practices, and advocating state-sponsored elimination of the traditional cults. Where once Firmicus praised Porphyry in the *Mathesis*, he now scorned and derided him for his belief in good demons, foreshadowing Augustine's position a century later.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Pagan: *The Theory of Astrology in Eight Books***

Establishing Firmicus's access to the *Corpus* are passages in both of his works, pre- and post-conversion, relating to his understanding of the will of God. With language taken directly from the *Hermetica*, Firmicus demonstrates one particular element of the Greek philosophic tradition subsumed by Christianity. *Corpus Hermeticum* treatise X asserts that "God's activity is will, and his essence is to will all things to be."<sup>10</sup> These same sentiments are found in the Neoplatonic thought of Plotinus's *Enneads*, where God's act of will and the coming-into-being of the substance of that act are simultaneous and indistinguishable.<sup>11</sup> Plotinus goes further by claiming that the existence of all sensible things and their teleological reason for being are "both produced at the one stroke".<sup>12</sup> Firmicus shows this same understanding by quoting in both the *Mathesis* and *De Errore* not from Plotinus, but from a key passage in the *Asclepius*:

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<sup>8</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *De Errore*, Intro, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *De Errore*, Intro, z4.

<sup>10</sup> Copenhaver, *Corpus Hermeticum* X.2, 30. Also X.3, "But god the father is the good in that he wills all things to be."

<sup>11</sup> For Plotinus, see *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen McKenna (London, Penguin Books: 1991), VIII.13-21. particularly end of XIII, 526. Plotinus (204ce-270ce) was the third-century philosopher credited with founding Neoplatonism. His works are transmitted with a short biography by his student Porphyry. All background information on him comes through Porphyry. His philosophical system is indebted to Socrates, Plato, and Numenius as well as Stoic and Peripatetic philosophy, including the concept of a God consisting of three hypostases of the One, the Intellect, and the All-Soul. Plotinus is the main source for Iamblichus in addition to the *Hermetica*.

<sup>12</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* VIII.14, 527.

God's will is itself perfect achievement since willing and achievement are complete for him at one and the same moment of time. (*voluntas etenim dei ipsa summa est perfectio utpote cum voluisse et perfecisse uno eodemque temporis puncto compleat.*)<sup>13</sup>

Unlike Lactantius, Firmicus limits his direct quotation of the *Hermetica* to just a few passages, but the presence of this language in both treatises points not only to Firmicus's knowledge of the *Asclepius*, but to the acceptance of this key concept within both a Christian and pagan framework, at least to the understanding of a recent convert. In the case of the Nicene Creed, the term *homoousios* entered orthodox belief as a conscious import from Greek philosophy. In the case of the *voluntas dei*, the concept is seamlessly shared by Neoplatonist, Hermetist, and Christian alike. While Books II through IV of the *Mathesis* describe the initial identification of horoscopes and begin the interpretive process, it is not until Book V that Firmicus delves into the true power of the signs. It is at this point that he must invoke divine protection to prevent the knowledge of astrology falling into the wrong hands, and he turns directly to Hermes to describe God. In preparation for discussing the signs of the Zodiac, Firmicus first offers a prayer to the One God, acknowledging the "Sole Governor and Chief of all, Sole Emperor and Lord, to whom the entire force of the heavenly powers is subservient, whose Will is the essence of finished creation."<sup>14</sup> He will later praise the *voluntas dei* in the Christian *De Errore* with a much more ominous tone towards the serpent and his cohorts. Quoting from Isaiah, Firmicus exclaims that God shall slay the great snake Satan for "the Will of God is the substance of the completed work."<sup>15</sup> The exact sense of the power and immediacy of divine will is maintained as Firmicus crosses the growing divide between Christian and pagan. As established by Plotinus, and then

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<sup>13</sup> Copenhaver, *Asclepius*.8, 71. Here *summa* implies essence, principal matter, or substance.

<sup>14</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*.V.praefatio, 155. Cuius *voluntas perfecti operis substantia est. Substantia* is used similarly to *summa* as nature or substance.

<sup>15</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *De Errore*, Ch. 26, 103. *Voluntas dei perfecti operis substantia est.*

applied by Firmicus through the *Asclepius* to the Christian God, God's act of willing an effect and the coming-into-being of that effect are one and the same.

Bringing the *voluntas dei* into his conception of Christianity from its Neoplatonic and Hermetic sources was acceptable, but there were some doctrines from the *Corpus* that disappear entirely in his transition from *Mathesis* to *De Errore*. For instance, in the same prayer found in the *praefatio* of Book V of the *Mathesis*, Firmicus conceptualized God as “Father of all and at the same time Mother”, a common Neoplatonic construction also found in the *Asclepius*.<sup>16</sup> In dialogue with his disciple Tat, Hermes acknowledges that God is “of both sexes”, confirmed also in *Corpus Hermeticum* treatise I as androgynous and in *Corpus Hermeticum* treatise V as a creative will identified as both mother and father.<sup>17</sup> In a similar opening prayer in the *proemium* of Book III, Firmicus praises “God the Creator, copying nature, has made man in the image of the universe”, not in the image of God.<sup>18</sup> None of these descriptions about the nature of God are maintained in the *De Errore*. Like Lactantius before him, Firmicus praises “Aesculapius and Hanubis” for their teaching of the *thema mundi*, the astrological birth chart of the universe upon which the fates of men depend, and it is “to them Most Powerful Mercury (Hermes) entrusted the secret.”<sup>19</sup> At each point in his books when Firmicus takes the opportunity to praise or describe God, he incorporates either Hermetic quotation directly or ideas present in the *Hermetica* and

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<sup>16</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*.V.praefatio, 156.

<sup>17</sup> Copenhaver, *Asclepius*.21, 79. *Corpus Hermeticum* I.9, 2 and I.15, 3, *Corpus Hermeticum* V.7, 19. See also Copenhaver's notes on “androgynous,” 103.

<sup>18</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*.III.proemium, 71.

<sup>19</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*.III.I.1, 71. Aesculapius = Asclepius, Hanubis = the Egyptian god Anubis.

found in other Neoplatonic sources as well.<sup>20</sup> Neither the praise for Hermes nor the creation myths of the Hermetica survive his Christian transformation.

### **The Christian: *The Error of the Pagan Religions***

Beyond the *voluntas dei*, Firmicus's beliefs change radically after conversion. In *De Errone*, the living entities that participated in the fatal determinism of astrology and were worthy of praise in the *Mathesis* became either tools of God, emptied of meaning in the light of Christ, or vile enemies of God and the Christian community. Returning again to the opening prayer of the *Mathesis*, Book V, Firmicus praises the Sun in language familiar to the Hermetica. The Sun orders all things in the heavens, provides the immortal soul in all living things, and wills the disposition of the fates.<sup>21</sup> Within the *Asclepius*, the Sun is a second god "governing all things and shedding light on all that are in the world."<sup>22</sup> Hermes further explains in *Corpus Hermeticum* treatise XVI exactly how the Sun governs the fate of humans. The Sun governs "troops of demons," some good, some bad, who "at the exact moment of birth...take possession of each of us as we come into being and receive a soul."<sup>23</sup> In this role, it is the Sun that drives the determinism of astrology and which Firmicus seeks to placate by asking forgiveness for revealing the secrets of prediction through horoscopes. Yet, after his conversion, the Sun has not only lost this preeminent position, but has only one true purpose. Railing against the mystery

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<sup>20</sup> The Proemium to Book VI contains a list of God's creative accomplishments mirroring those of Book V, as does the Astrologer's Oath in Book VII. The Astrologer's Creed in Book VIII contains a brief remark on the soul being lost if given into vicious desires.

<sup>21</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*.V. praefatio, 156.

<sup>22</sup> Copenhaver, *Asclepius*.29, 85.

<sup>23</sup> Copenhaver, *Corpus Hermeticum* XVI.14, 60. For Plato, the human soul is constructed by the gods beneath the One God and creator. It is through their failed understanding and individuality that the human soul becomes susceptible to the outside world and confused. Plato considers the soul a physical object consisting of rotating spheres that should be in harmony with each other according to specific ratios. For Plato, see *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 59-61.

religions, Firmicus has the Sun itself address its false worshippers, saying “I was created by God to usher in the day, and that alone is enough for me.”<sup>24</sup> Gone is any mention of fate or in a solar determinant for the immortal soul. Firmicus reduced the Sun to a supporting role only, and a physical one at that, claiming that “I frankly show myself as just what I am, and I want you to understand of me nothing else but what you see.” Although earlier scholars are correct in observing that Firmicus did not directly attack the astrology of his pagan convictions, the removal of the Sun from its celestial position in determinism fundamentally degrades the strength of the stars in ruling the fate of human beings.<sup>25</sup> Thorndike characterized this rebuke of pagans by the Sun as evidence that “he (Firmicus) still regarded the stars as of immense importance in the administration of the universe.” On the contrary, Firmicus gives only a literary voice to the Sun. The Sun has lost its power to affect human lives because the intermediary role of celestial demons has been supplanted in his new Christian “theology” by the role of Christ. There is no need to attack astrology when the core dependency on the stars for governing fate has already been eliminated. Scholars have also claimed that Firmicus is inconsistent even in his earlier belief in fatal determinism, citing his prayers to the gods in an attempt to resist the influence of the stars.<sup>26</sup> But Firmicus himself cites Socrates as having overcome his base earthly impulses “by the power of wisdom and virtue”, which is also supported by *Corpus Hermeticum* treatise XVI.<sup>27</sup> Demons twist and manipulate two parts of Plato’s tripartite soul, but “the rational

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<sup>24</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *De Errone*, Ch. 8, 63.

<sup>25</sup> Lynn Thorndike, “A Roman Astrologer as a Historical Source: Julius Firmicus Maternus,” in *Classical Philology*, 8:4 (Oct., 1913): 419. Firmicus Maternus, *De Errone*, Introduction, 19-20 and note 88, 135.

<sup>26</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*.I.VI.2, 20. Even Plotinus succumbed to the stars for Firmicus, Book I.VII.14-22, 22-23.

<sup>27</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*.I.VI.3-4, 20. Plato posited three parts of the soul located in three parts of the body. The emotions and feelings of the heart and the physical appetites of the belly were the parts susceptible to demons and stellar influences. The powers of reason and decision making located in the head could be trained to

part of the soul stands unmastered by the demons, suitable as a receptacle for god” and Hermes calls this manipulative process Fate.<sup>28</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum* treatise XII concurs that “all people are subject to fate” but that “those that possess reason...are not affected as the others are.” For the divine part of the human soul, “nothing is impossible...neither setting a human soul above fate nor, if it happens that a soul is careless, setting it beneath fate.”<sup>29</sup> However, unlike his incorporation of the *voluntas dei* in both the *Mathesis* and *De Errone*, as a Christian, Firmicus could no longer rely on prayers to the gods or a Socratic human virtue to escape the dictates of the stars. Instead, Firmicus replaced the rule of Fate with the innovative rule of Christ Redeemer.

The brunt of Firmicus’s attack fell on the mystery religions. His attack was ferocious and specific, betraying an intimate knowledge of ritual practices; perhaps the polemic of a recent convert assaulting his former cult cohorts as proof of his new faith.<sup>30</sup> The sources of his classical education like Cicero, Ovid, and Livy are still reliable for their rhetorical skill.<sup>31</sup> But where Firmicus could also accept certain attributes of the Neoplatonic god and transfer them to his Christian God, he could not accept the worship of figures he thought were at worst baleful emissaries of the Devil and at best men inflated to godlike proportion. Like Lactantius, Firmicus employed euhemerism as a primary point of attack. After this lengthy assault on the failures of the mystery religions, Firmicus provides a Christian alternative to fate and death in two chapters

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overcome these baser influences. Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, 16-17 for an introductory summary, 97-100 for Plato’s main discussion.

<sup>28</sup> Copenhaver, *Corpus Hermeticum*.XVI.15-16, 60-61.

<sup>29</sup> Copenhaver, *Corpus Hermeticum*.XII.9, 45.

<sup>30</sup> The fact that Firmicus does *not* attack a “Hermetic cult” is itself interesting. This may add some weight, *ex nihilo*, to the theory that Hermetic doctrine never did reach the level of cult practice and worship, at least not in the time of Firmicus to be worthy of specific attack.

<sup>31</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *De Errone*, Introduction, 22-25.

on the triumph of Christ, repeating the developing Christian doctrine of recapitulation that would not become orthodox for centuries. For Firmicus after conversion, Christ became the one entity who had escaped the cycle of death. Supporting his exegesis through the use of Biblical quotations found most likely in Cyprian, Firmicus demonstrates the death, resurrection, and spiritual inheritance of Christ.<sup>32</sup> The recapitulation doctrine that Firmicus asserts, discovered through his acquaintance with the works of Irenaeus, is that Christ regained through self-sacrifice what Adam had lost through transgression.<sup>33</sup> The immortality which the philosophers and the Hermetists sought had once been available to humanity, but “by scorning God’s commands, this man [Adam] ensnared the human race in the affliction of mortality” and it is through renewed obedience that humans may again attain this realm.<sup>34</sup> The redemptive goal of Christ is “to save mankind, to conquer death, to link the frailty of the human body with divine immortality.”<sup>35</sup> By 529ce and the Second Council of Orange, this doctrine would be an admitted part of orthodox belief, but in the mid-fourth century it was a distinct break with a pagan past, and in the case of Firmicus, a supporting concept for an escape from death without resort to the training of the Hermetica or the trappings of the mystery religions.<sup>36</sup> However, Firmicus’s greatest departure follows closely his demotion of the Sun from astrological entity to simple celestial light with far greater consequence for pagan worshippers.

Although Firmicus may not have directly denigrated his past astrological beliefs, he took an entirely different, violently partisan view of the demons which interacted with the human soul

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<sup>32</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *De Errone*, Ch. 24, 95-100.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, see note 470, 213.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 25, 100-102.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch 25, 101.

<sup>36</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *De Errone*, Note on 470.

as the operational forces of Fate. The “demons” of the Hermetica were not the post-Christian embodiments of evil. These are the δαίμονες of Plato’s *Symposium*, divinities midway between gods and men, between mortal and immortal.<sup>37</sup> For Plato, δαίμονες communicate between gods and men and are the sources of prophecy, spells, and enchantments.<sup>38</sup> For Hermes, δαίμονες take on many roles and according to their nature can be good, evil, or a mixture of the two. They are “airy” spirits, existing between physical humanity and the spiritual gods, a form of entity from which humans originated and to which they return after death.<sup>39</sup> But Firmicus no longer accepts either of these possibilities, instead relegating δαίμονες to their familiar role as Christian demons.<sup>40</sup> The gods worshipped by pagans are in fact creations of the Devil for “he devised those gods whom you worship.”<sup>41</sup> The temptation brought by the Serpent in the Garden, “that you shall be as gods”, is now an affront to Firmicus’s Christian sensibility as opposed to a legitimate goal of Neoplatonic or Hermetic philosophy.<sup>42</sup> And the purpose that demons serve is no longer one of possible support or even the transmission of qualities to the soul in the sense of fatal astrological determinism. Instead, demons through the Devil “boast that you help wretched men – all that you may slay them by your cruelty, deceive them by your persuasions, and overthrow them by your promises.”<sup>43</sup> These words will sound familiar when encountered again in the writings of Augustine a century later. Like Augustine, Firmicus derided Porphyry, but in

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<sup>37</sup> For Plato, see *The Symposium: The Dialogues of Plato, vol. 2*, trans. R. E. Allen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), commentary, 48-49.

<sup>38</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 202d-203a, 146.

<sup>39</sup> Copenhaver, *Asclepius*.5, 69, *Corpus Hermeticum*.I.23, 5, *Corpus Hermeticum*.II.14, 11.

<sup>40</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *De Errone*, commentary, 14.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 26, 103.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 26, 102.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 26, 103.

this case, he turned on a teacher he had respected. Porphyry, who was praised in the *Mathesis* as “our Porphyry”, who supported the secret transmission of astrological knowledge only amongst the elect, is attacked in *De Errone* as “the defender of the cults, enemy of God, foe of the truth, teacher of the arts of wickedness.”<sup>44</sup>

During the short quarter-century from Lactantius to Firmicus, Hermes Trismegistus was transformed from pagan prophet to polemical target, reflecting the needs of a growing Christian community seeking to define itself. As the process proceeded, certain elements of Neoplatonic thought were imported (like the consubstantial Father and Son of the Nicene *homoousios*), others were amicably maintained (like the *voluntas dei*), still others (like the δαίμονες) took on a new, insidious form. In the *Hermetica*, the hierarchy of being had placed demons midway between humanity and the Gods, ennobling them with a purpose, albeit ambiguous, of performing both good and evil deeds. But after the defeat of the “second god” of Arius, Lactantius, and the *Hermetica* at Nicaea, Christianity had continued its assault deeper into this hierarchy, stripping the demons of any positive attributes. The Christian Firmicus accepted their new role and viciously attacked not pagan misunderstanding of the divine nature, but pagan practices and worship, recommending the full force of the state be applied in stamping out false religion. In fact, some of Firmicus’s peculiar choice of wording appears in the Theodosian Code itself. The decree of 346ce under Constantius and Constans demands the closure of all temples in all cities “so as to deny all abandoned men the opportunity to commit sin.”<sup>45</sup> These abandoned men, *perditi*, mentioned seven times in the *De Errone*, are to be “struck down with the avenging sword” according to the Code. The *gladius vindex* is also an element in the *De Errone* when

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<sup>44</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*.VII.1, 233, *De Errone*, Ch 13.4, 72.

<sup>45</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *De Errone*, commentary, 14. Pharr, *Theodosian Code* XVI.10.4, 472.

Firmicus quotes in his final chapter from Deuteronomy 13.6 that even a wife, brother, or son shall be killed for convincing others to serve other gods.<sup>46</sup> Firmicus was able to abandon the interlocutors so vital to the determinism of astrology by depending fully on the redemptive power of Christ. But during this process, the distance between humanity and God had grown. It would remain for one of the Fathers of the Church a century later to resolve the issue, again confronting the *Corpus Hermeticum*, by showing that an entity at once fully human and fully divine could bridge the growing gap.

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<sup>46</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *De Errone*, Ch. 29.1-2, 115. See Commentary, 17, note 561 on 226 and note 81 on 134-135.

## CHAPTER 4 AUGUSTINE

Already in some of his earliest theological writings, twenty years before he developed his full-fledged critique of the Hermetic *Corpus* in *City of God*, Augustine began to formulate and express theological opinions about the identity and teachings of Hermes Trismegistus. Before his definitive encounter with Hermes on the grounds of mediation, he had two other occasions to address the pagan sage. In *Contra Faustum*, written in 398ce, he disputes the Manichaean denial of the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> In the dialog, Faustus argues that Hermes can be used to persuade pagans to believe in Christianity whereas the Hebrew Old Testament cannot.<sup>2</sup> His central argument for inclusion of the Hebrew Old Testament is that it contains many writings that carry the weight of ancient authority, bears directly on Christ, and can strengthen the presentation of the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> In confronting the uses of pagan philosophy, Augustine incorporates a typical “set” of pagan authorities, including the Sibyls and Orpheus.<sup>4</sup> By referencing Hermes and the other pagan writers, he follows a discursive style of pagan citation where Christians could find some use for pagan ideas. He notes that Hermes “may be useful for the refutation of pagan error, but cannot lead us to believe.” Augustine dealt with the use of pagan authors in *De Doctrina Christiana*, first written between 395ce and 397ce, but only completed in 426ce.<sup>5</sup> He explains that “we were not wrong to learn the alphabet just because they say that the god Mercury was its

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<sup>1</sup> For Augustine, see *St. Augustin: the Writings against the Manichaeans and against the Donatists in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, XIII, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994). All English translations are from this edition. References to Augustine’s *Contra Faustum* are taken from this edition and will be referenced as *Contra Faustum* with book, section, and page numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Contra Faustum*.XIII.1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, XIII.8.

<sup>4</sup> Lactantius also follows this pattern, usually quoting from all three sources as foreshadowing Christianity. See *Divine Institutes*.IV.6, 255-257 for examples of quotations from multiple Sibyls and Hermes.

<sup>5</sup> For Augustine, see *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), xi-xiii. All English translations are from this edition.

patron”, even from those who worship in the form of stones.<sup>6</sup> But even in this early encounter, he notes many flaws in Hermes, which will later lead him to the polemic style of pagan citation found in *City of God*. Even though they may have spoken of the Christian God, they lead their people to worship idols and demons. The value of their prediction is like “the confession of devils” against “the proclamation of angels”.<sup>7</sup> In both of these cases, Augustine is indirectly addressing Hermes, but already holds a negative view of the figure which will become more pessimistic through the development of his theology of mediation.

### **Early Writings**

In these writings, as in his later theological treatises, Augustine illustrates the development of Christian orthodoxy after the Council of Nicaea by paying particular attention to the Christological definitions that would be decided at Ephesus a year after his death. His early views on Hermes in the *Contra Faustum* serve a mostly conventional view of pagan authors as possible support for Christian argument. He also supported the cautious inclusion of Hermetic knowledge in *De Doctrina Christiana*. By the time he writes *City of God*, however, he has found a much more appropriate use for Hermes. At the heart of his understanding of Christ is the theology of mediation. Developed in both the *Confessions* and much more fully in *City of God*, Augustine finds in the wholly human and wholly divine nature of Christ the one and only possibility of bridging what he understood to be an infinite divide between human beings and God. Engaging the pagan author Apuleius on his own terms, Augustine constructs logical fallacies to discredit the pagan doctrine of demonic mediation. He works from this proof when attacking pagan practices, particularly the “gods made by men” and the deception of Hermes,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, II.18, 91.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, XIII.15.

both found in the Latin *Asclepius* of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. In confronting the *Corpus*, Augustine also addresses the universal appeal of the Christian message and the cult of the saints. Yet foundational to his developed theological objections to the Hermetic *Corpus* would be his understanding of the distinctive mediating role of Christ.

Augustine first set down his thoughts on mediation in his *Confessions*, written nearly twenty years after his conversion in Milan, before comparing the positive results of this doctrine against the negative results of pagan demonic mediation through the *Corpus*. The first nine books of the *Confessions* form an autobiography of his early years and eventual conversion to Catholic Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Beyond the autobiographical account of the young man, the latter four books are devoted to the issues of philosophy and theology current to Augustine the bishop. Book X, devoted to his concept of memory, contains his explanation of how to come to knowledge of God as well as the barriers to this process. Beginning with the desire to know God, so as to better know himself, Augustine exalts the faculties of memory as a hypothetical tool to know God, beginning from the premise that love of God is a certainty, not a feeling.<sup>9</sup> He first searches the physical world for God but finds the mind superior.<sup>10</sup> After introducing concepts like number and logic, none of which come directly from sense perception, he concludes, echoing Plato's concept of Forms existing independent of perceived reality and accessible to the soul before birth, that memory is an act of recollection of concepts already

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<sup>8</sup> For Augustine, see *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), xi-xxiii. All English translations are from this edition. See Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 174-175, for chronological tables and the dating of Augustine's writings.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*.X.5, 85.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, X.6, 183-184.

present in the mind.<sup>11</sup> He then explores his own emotions and the mind itself, but God still remains outside all these faculties.<sup>12</sup> Next, Augustine begins to address the source of these ideas recalled by memory. His discussion focuses on understanding the idea of happiness present in all human beings and he asks the crucial question: “But how have they known about it so as to want it?”<sup>13</sup> He argues that regardless of the individual definition of happiness, all men seek this and share in the understanding of what happiness is, even those laboring under the self-deception that something other than God can fulfill this desire. Finally, he concludes that God is a transcendent being outside the world yet recognized by all. “Where then did I find you so that I could learn of you if not in the fact that you transcend me?”<sup>14</sup> Augustine’s search for God yields no success, leading him to propose God’s true inaccessibility and the necessity for a particular kind of connection between God and humanity.

Augustine, therefore, conceives a distant God, found neither in the physical world nor in the “recesses of memory”. He places God outside all of these experiences as “the abiding light by which I investigated these matters to discover whether they existed, what they were, and what value should be attached to them.”<sup>15</sup> He has constructed his vision of God as informing all of reality, perceived through the senses as well as through the mind, yet the faculties available to humanity, even in their infinite capacity for imagination, are not enough to reach God. He asks

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, X.10, 189. “The ideas signified by those sounds I have not touched by sense-perception, not have I seen them independently of my mind...So they were there even before I had learnt them, but were not in my memory...the answer must be that they were already in the memory.”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, X.25, 201. “just as you are not a bodily image nor the emotional feeling of a living person such as we experience when glad or sad, or when we desire, fear, remember, forget, and anything of that kind, so also you are not the mind itself.”

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, X.20, 196.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, X.26, 201.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, X.40, 218.

“Who could be found to reconcile me to you?”<sup>16</sup> This question leads him to the doctrine of Christ as the only mediator to bridge this gap. Both here in the *Confessions* and later in Book VIII of *City of God* Augustine directly engages pagan authors on the issue of bridging the infinite divide between created and Creator, showing that only one who participates fully in both realms can act as mediator between the two.

The attack on paganism in the *Confessions* is very general, almost an aside used to strengthen an already successful argument about the nature of God and humanity. Given the nature of the God Augustine has expounded and the failure of human faculties to reach such a God, he finds it easy to ask leading questions of his pagan opponents: “Was I to beg the help of angels? What prayer should I use? What sacred rites?” These and other rhetorical questions are used to illustrate the folly of earthly intervention in approaching God. As to why pagans would believe such things, he credits the illusions of the devil: “Through an affinity in heart they attracted to themselves as associates and allies of their pride the powers of the air who deluded them with magical powers.”<sup>17</sup> Augustine will deal with both the illusions of the demons and how they might be “attracted” when dealing with the Latin *Asclepius* and those “men who make gods”, but the essential doctrine of Christ as mediator will be the basis for all of the vehemence and scorn Augustine pours on those who worship them in the first place.

### *City of God*

Beginning in 413ce, the Bishop of Hippo wrote *City of God* over the course of nearly fifteen years, with books I-XIV finished by 418ce and the final eight books not complete until

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, X.42, 218.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine’s reference to an “affinity of heart” echoes his argument in *De Doctrina Christiana* that those who associate with demons have established a special set of agreed upon signs for communication. It is this “affinity” that allows the demons to deceive each person in a unique manner. See Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II.24, 101.

426ce.<sup>18</sup> Augustine directly engages with pagan philosophers including Porphyry and Plotinus, taking particular interest in the works of Apuleius and Hermes Trismegistus. His conception of mediation is very similar in *Confessions* and *City of God*, even to the point of asking almost identical rhetorical questions about prayers and rites, this time directly to the pagan author Apuleius.<sup>19</sup> What changes in *City of God* is that the theologian develops a strong, logically constructed argument proving that the gods and demons of pagan philosophy are evil and the enemies of humanity, inherently deceptive and therefore incapable of mediating with God. Then he confronts what he considers active examples of pagan worship, using both his proof of the evil of demons and the lamented prophecies of Trismegistus to show the emptiness of all pagan religion. Augustine uses the philosophical implications of Apuleius to attack the practices seen in the *Asclepius*.

Apuleius was a fellow African whose writings from 150ce still circulated by Augustine's period. Known to modern readers through his novel *Metamorphoses* (or *The Golden Ass*), Apuleius constructed his own philosophy of mediation in *De Deo Socratis* (*The God of Socrates*), and Augustine deals almost exclusively with this work.<sup>20</sup> Apuleius discusses the personal demon that accompanied Socrates and in the process assigned attributes to gods and demons. He also supports the Platonic concept that "no god has any dealings with men" and therefore proposes demons as the intermediary between the two.<sup>21</sup> In answer to Hunink's

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<sup>18</sup> For Augustine, see *The City of God against the Pagans*, Vol. III, Books VIII-XI, Loeb Classical Library, trans. David Wiesen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), lxxviii-lxxxii. All English translations are from this edition.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., VIII.19, 89. "Now, I ask, what kind of prayers of men does he suppose are carried to the good gods by demons – magical prayers or legitimate?" as compared to Augustine, *Confessions*, X.42, 218.

<sup>20</sup> For Apuleius, see *Apuleius: Rhetorical Works*, ed. Stephen Harrison, John Hilton, and Vincent Hunink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) for a critical edition and translation of *De Deo Socratis*.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, VIII.18, 83.

question as to why Augustine spends so much time on this text, he takes the statements of Apuleius (and Plato) as starting points for a generalized pagan view of the universe, then creates a series of logical arguments to discredit demons and demonstrate their inability to act as intermediaries, leading to the alternative mediator he has in mind.<sup>22</sup> In Book VIII, his first proof will demonstrate that demons are inherently evil, and later in Book IX he will show that there are no ‘good’ demons.

Acknowledging Plato as an authoritative figure in whom both pagans and Christians could find merit, Augustine focuses on the expulsion of poets from the ideal city Plato proposes in *The Republic*. Plato expels the poets for outrages against the gods and corruption of the citizenry; however the gods themselves demanded stage plays and the praises of these same poets as worship.<sup>23</sup> He questions what sort of gods would require what both Plato and Christians considered destructive, base, and wicked. Augustine reviews the three forms of being of the Platonists, gods, demons, and humanity, and the five attributes that distinguish them, particularly the demons. Their species is animal, just as humans are terrestrial animals and gods are ethereal animals. All three share a rational mind, distinguishing them from other, lower animals. Demons share their immortal bodies, uniquely composed of air, with the gods, but share the passionate soul of men and, like men, share the wretchedness inherent in a soul moved by the disturbances of the passions.<sup>24</sup> Gods, aloof from these passions, blessedly happy, never mixing with men, and defined by Plato as all good, cannot be the target of this base form of worship. Augustine first extrapolates that demons have demanded this worship and demons are the beings that Plato has offended by expelling the poets, not the good gods. Neither Apuleius nor Plato

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<sup>22</sup> Hunink, Apuleius, 89.

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, VIII.13, 59-61.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, VIII.16, 73-77.

directly implicates demons in this expulsion. Augustine's single logical leap to the conclusion that demons were the beings Plato was actually combating sets up a whole series of logically derived results about their nature that serve the remainder of his argument against pagan demonic mediation. Next, he concludes from Apuleius that these beings between gods and humanity are said to "convey to the gods the prayers of men and then bring back to men favorable answers to their requests."<sup>25</sup> He then asks the question, if the demons are intermediaries, what was communicated to the good gods by the wretched demons about Plato's expulsion of the poets? Following an Aristotelian proof, Augustine succeeds in defining a set of terms which leads to the conclusion that demons are neither proper objects of worship, nor can they fulfill the role of intermediary. The demons must either tell the gods the truth about Plato, implicating themselves in the wickedness of the poets, or they must conceal their own nature, or they must lie to the gods.<sup>26</sup> Augustine succeeds at his initial task and then examines demons in practice through the *Corpus Hermeticum*, particularly the *Asclepius*.<sup>27</sup>

The *Asclepius* is the Latin translation of the earlier Greek text referred to by Lactantius as the *Perfect Discourse*. Probably translated in the fourth century, the Latin version was unavailable to Lactantius but Augustine quotes directly and extensively from the text.<sup>28</sup> Hermes Trismegistus addresses his disciple Asclepius, ranging over a wide variety of topics including the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, VIII.18, 83.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, VIII.21, 97-101.

<sup>27</sup> The *Asclepius* was transmitted through a number of manuscripts also containing Apuleius's works, leading to past arguments that Apuleius was its author. Those arguments had ended, until recently, with the conclusion that Apuleius was not its author. See Vincent Hunink, "Apuleius and the *Asclepius*," 288-308 for an alternative view reattributing the *Asclepius* to Apuleius. Mariateresa Scotti provides a response in "The *Asclepius*: Thoughts on a Re-Opened Debate," in *Vigiliae Christianae*, 54:4 (2000): 396-416. See also Copenhaver, 214 for notes on translations of the *Asclepius* and on the attribution to Apuleius as "groundless".

<sup>28</sup> Fowden, 198. Note also that Lactantius explains that he has translated the *Perfect Discourse* directly from the Greek for his own use. *The Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, Preface, Chapter 42.

soul, the One god and other gods created by him, and the structure of the universe. Augustine finds in the text an opportunity to demonstrate the results of fraternizing with the malevolent spirits he has been discussing. He does not concern himself with whether or not he is dealing with actual Hermetic practices, recognizing that the most offensive aspect of this direct opposite to true religion occurred in some deep past.<sup>29</sup>

In *City of God*, Augustine first attacks the Hermetic “art of making gods”. Hermes claimed that his ancestors had not only discovered the divine nature but had figured out how to create this nature as well. Using this art, demons were called down into the statues of the great temples, and those statues “ensouled and conscious” performed great deeds, prophecy, and cures.<sup>30</sup> Hermes credits his gods that “render loving kindness” and “give help by other means”, but Augustine only finds in these miracles more evidence of demonic deceit.<sup>31</sup> As in his treatment of *De Deo Socratis*, he carefully chooses the passages that support his theological position. Again, from previous proof, he shows that demons are either making pretense of benefiting their worshippers, to bring them to greater vice, or they are doing evil without disguise, such as those gods that require sacrifice for appeasement of anger. A passage in the *Asclepius* further reflects his argument regarding demons moved by the passions, just like men, in that “anger comes easily to earthly and material gods because humans have made and

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<sup>29</sup> There is ongoing scholarly discussion for and against calling “Hermeticism” a religion. Grese sees Corpus Hermeticum XIII not as a liturgy but as supportive reading for cult members that have already been transformed by a Hermetic ceremony, Grese, 200-202; Fowden sees the Hermetica describing a “post-cultic phase” of spiritual development, amenable to many of the practitioners of Late Antique paganism and mystery religions, Fowden, 146-150; Quispel posits a true secret society based in Alexandria complete with rites and sacraments, Giles Quispel, “The Asclepius: From the Hermetic Lodge in Alexandria to the Greek Eucharist and the Roman Mass,” in *Gnosis and Hermeticism: From Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. Roelf van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraff (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 69-77.

<sup>30</sup> Copenhaver, *Asclepius*, 81-90.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 90-91.

assembled them from both natures.”<sup>32</sup> Augustine concedes that Apuleius and Hermes disagree as to whether demons are mediators, but he brings to the *Corpus* the idea that all pagan interaction occurs with these same demons, finally concluding that the demons of Hermes had no power in the world beyond that permitted them by God.<sup>33</sup> The tenor of the entire argument reflects Augustine’s contrast between the proper worship of a loving Christ capable of intercession on behalf of human beings as over against the false worship of demons that have no intercessory power and are bent only on deception.<sup>34</sup> Bringing Augustine’s criticism of Apuleius back into context as a method to critique the pagan practices found in the *Asclepius* also helps to explain why he avoided any of the positive results to be found in Apuleius’s theology.<sup>35</sup>

The second part of Augustine’s attack deals with the ultimate results of demonic deception. In the same apocalyptic prophecy about an end to the ancient religion of Egypt that Lactantius had also dealt with, Hermes explains that his ancient ancestors made mistakes in their worship of the gods and as a result later invented the art of making their own gods.<sup>36</sup> He goes on to explain that all Egyptian efforts towards worship will have been in vain, “divinity will return from earth

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, VIII.24, 125.

<sup>34</sup> William E. Klingshirn, “Divination and the Disciplines of Knowledge according to Augustine,” in *Augustine and the Disciplines: From Cassiciacum to Confessions*, ed. Karla Pollmann and Mark Vessey (Oxford University Press, 2005), 137-140. Klingshirn discusses the centrality of Augustine’s mediation doctrine in regards to his view towards divination. The same distant God that necessitates a very special mediator also demonstrates why demonic access to foreknowledge can never be complete.

<sup>35</sup> Hunink, *Augustine’s Polemic against Apuleius*, 95. “One cannot help wondering why Augustine reacts in so strong a manner, and why he simply omits the positive aspects of Apuleius’ theory of demons.” “It remains strange to see how an acute reader such as Augustine could misrepresent his views, in spite of their common background as Africans.” The point of Augustine’s attack is not to do justice to Apuleius, but to conflate Apuleius and Hermes to show the failure of pagan philosophy and practice.

<sup>36</sup> Both Augustine and Lactantius had access to a prophecy describing a cleansing flood, fire, and pestilence, but substantial additional information is added after Lactantius’s translation. See Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*.VII.18, 520 for the prophecy available to Lactantius.

to heaven, and Egypt will be abandoned.”<sup>37</sup> Hermes laments the denigration of the “glorious construction” of the world, a series of inversions in the roles of the mad for the wise, the scoundrel for the decent person, and the capital penalty for those who continue to reverence the gods.<sup>38</sup> The Latin in the statement regarding the errors of the Egyptians is actually a mistranslation of the original Greek and Augustine interprets it in a purely negative light for Hermes.<sup>39</sup> He takes this statement to indicate that the Egyptians had long ago been exposed to the ideas of proper religion and as a result of their errors veered from the true religion into the mistake of worshipping idols created through this new art. Unlike Lactantius and earlier authors, Augustine no longer focuses either on Hermes’ foreknowledge of Christ or on his supportive arguments for a Christian God, instead finding ancient demonic deceptions and the failures they engender in Hermes. Deceived by the demons into lamenting the loss of a false religion, he failed to see Christianity, yet the power of God has forced him to admit these errors for later Christians to see and understand. If even an authority of such renown could be deceived by demons and yet, through the grace of the Christian God, be made to reveal these ancient errors, then the true religion and right belief has overcome the false. Augustine even provides an

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<sup>37</sup> Copenhaver, *Asclepius*, 81.

<sup>38</sup> The section of the prophecy that Augustine deals with here was added to the *Asclepius* after the time of Lactantius. These views reflect a distinct fear of Christian practices, including ascetics with a more negative view of the world. For a discussion of the dates of these additions, see Copenhaver, 239. Pierre Chuvin, *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans*, trans. B. A. Archer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 67-68, places the prophecy in the context of Alexandria, particularly the destruction of the Serapeum in 391.

<sup>39</sup> Quoniam ergo proavi nostri multum errabant circa deorum rationem increduli et non animadvertentes ad cultum religionemque divinam: invenerunt artem qua efficerent deos (Therefore, since our remote ancestors erred concerning the doctrine of the gods, unbelieving and not attending to the form of worship and sacred reverence, they invented an art by which they could make gods), Augustine, *City of God*, VIII.24, 114-116, my translation. Augustine’s explanation that Hermes has erred and then been forced by God to admit it is an attempt to explain a mistranslation of the Greek *ἐπειδή* (‘when’ or ‘after’) to the Latin *quoniam* (‘since’ or ‘because’). Scott argues that Augustine may have been puzzled by this problem. However, I believe that Augustine’s solution agrees perfectly both with his proof of demons as deceivers and God as all powerful. See Walter Scott, *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924-1936), Vol. IV, 183 for a discussion. Also see Copenhaver, *Asclepius*, 90 for a translation from the Greek.

apology for Hermes, maintaining to some extent his ancient reputation, by claiming it was the demons themselves that found expression in Hermes' words.<sup>40</sup>

In a third objection, Augustine contrasts the universal Christian church with the elitist attitude present not only in the *Asclepius*, but also found in Gnostic teachings.<sup>41</sup> The surviving Hermetic works are classified as “optimistic” or “pessimistic” based on whether the world is seen as evil, similar to Gnostic views of the created universe.<sup>42</sup> Even though the *Asclepius* is certainly optimistic both on the world and humanity's unique position in it, the human goal of attaining divinity is “only for the few”.<sup>43</sup> Once again, Augustine finds in these gods fashioned by men “for a man of that kind, not for every man.”<sup>44</sup> The kinds of men that he is focused on are those, like Hermes, deceived in the distant past by the wiles of the demons, and maintaining those beliefs even in the face of their own predictions about the end of their religion. He enters into his final point, defending the cult of the saints. This point also stems from the Hermetic tradition of an end to religion in Egypt. Hermes predicts that Egypt “will be filled completely with tombs and corpses”, interpreted as an allusion to Christian practice as a form of

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<sup>40</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, VIII.26, 139 and VIII.24, 119.

<sup>41</sup> See Irvin & Sunquist, 87-90 and 115-128 for brief notes on Gnostic secret knowledge only available to the elite. Although some of the topics dealt with by both Gnosticism and the *Corpus Hermeticum* are similar, Fowden credits this not to direct sharing but a general cultural milieu and shared systems of thought regarding divinity, the soul, and matter, see Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 113-155.

<sup>42</sup> Differing views of the world present in the *Corpus* has led to much discussion in scholarship. Some treatises, labeled “pessimistic” view the world as an evil construction from which the soul must escape (similar to a Gnostic viewpoint), while others labeled “optimistic” view the world as the construction of a good god meant to instruct humanity. Fowden has argued that the two perspectives are consistent if viewed as a continuum along which an initiate travels. “Optimistic” treatises are therefore early in this process, using the world as a guide. “Pessimistic” treatises are for further on in the process of spiritual enlightenment, when the world is seen as holding the initiate back. See Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 97-102; Copenhaver, xxxix.

<sup>43</sup> Copenhaver, *Asclepius*, 79. “Not all humans, but only the few who have the mind to contain so great a bounty,” 77.

<sup>44</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, VIII.24, 127.

worshipping the dead.<sup>45</sup> Augustine gives a straightforward account of what Christians are doing regarding their saints. Saints are examples to be emulated, not gods to be worshipped. Banquets and offerings at memorials (which is not the practice of the better-instructed) are not sacrifices, but food is taken to the martyrs to be sanctified and then distributed to the poor, for sacrifice “is a rite that belongs to the service of one God alone.”<sup>46</sup>

Augustine’s Christianity is one no longer accepting of alternate pagan views. Never denying the reality of demons, or their power, he embraces a Christian world view where a distant God is only reached through Christ, and ancient religions have devolved into collusion with demons which have no positive traits whatsoever. Not only is this path the only path, but unlike pagan hopes for divine transcendence, Christianity is open to everyone, not just to the spiritual or philosophic elite. As for a new Christian cult of the dead, Augustine clarifies that the saints are not gods, nor are they worshipped as such. The real core of his argument concerns Apuleius and demons, but once his proof is available, the *Corpus* provides him with real-world examples to demonstrate the fundamental failure of pagan practices and a narrower spectrum of legitimate Christian belief.

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<sup>45</sup> Copenhaver, *Asclepius*, 81.

<sup>46</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, VIII.27, 143.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

If, according to Boyarin, “orthodoxy...functions as a category to make and mark the border between Christianity and its proximate other religions” then a full explanation of this border-formation process must include not only the separation of Christianity from Judaism, but Christianity from paganism as well.<sup>1</sup> The *Corpus Hermeticum* can be used to define this “second front” in the battle of Christian identity formation based on the responses of a succession of authors and their changing perspectives over time. Whether real or imaginary, Hermes and his teachings in the *Corpus Hermeticum* (selectively appropriated or discredited within the works of Late Antique Christian authors) demonstrates the shrinking boundaries of orthodox Christian theology. References to the *Corpus* show that this boundary has moved over time. Lactantius found in Hermes a kindred spirit with shared conceptions of the divine and a forceful argument for the merging of common Christian and monotheistic pagan concepts which were permeating the eastern Empire immediately preceding the conversion of Constantine. But one effect of the Council of Nicaea was that Christians could no longer accept the idea of a Savior who was at all similar to the gods and heroes of the pagan past. Shortly after, Firmicus Maternus showed that the redemptive qualities of the pagan δαίμονες had been subsumed by the redemptive Christ. Where Lactantius may quote Hermes for his support, Augustine from the outset, in *Contra Faustum*, is uncomfortable relying on “the Egyptian”; in fact he even wonders “if there ever was such a person.”<sup>2</sup> For Augustine, Hermes now lies almost wholly outside this

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<sup>1</sup> Boyarin, 206. In conversation with Dr. Boyarin on a visit to the University of Florida, in relation to *Border Lines*, he expressed regret that “too much of the rest of the world (had been) left out, particularly paganism.” It was this statement more than any other that helped place a conceptual framework around this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, XIII.15. The final proof for Augustine’s suspicion would not come until the Renaissance when Isaac Casaubon in 1620, in the new tradition of Italian philology, examined the documents and showed the Greek language and place names were from the second- and third-century, not Mosaic antiquity.

boundary. It is not until *City of God* that Augustine explains the basis of this exclusion through the development of his distinctive theology of mediation. Following Irenaeus, Augustine definitively showed that the Christ of Arius and the demons of the pagans, both midway between God and humanity, were insufficient to meet the needs of redemption. Brought about by the narrowing of Christian boundaries, the process would continue with Cyril of Alexandria's "malicious delight" in quoting Hermes during his attack on Julian's *Contra Galilaeos*.<sup>3</sup> The continued examination of these changing references to Hermes through other authors, both Christian and pagan, not only helps to define the evolution of the core Christian concepts that form orthodox belief, but places this process into the larger context of how orthodoxy develops.<sup>4</sup>

### **The *Corpus* and Religion**

Moving beyond the quotations of Hermes found in Christian writers, the *Corpus* reveals broader theoretical aspects regarding the formation of "religion" in general and heresy in particular. Responses to the *Corpus* provide concrete, supportive examples for the sociological examination of heresy. Jacques Berlinerblau defines three methodological axioms for the study of heresy, each of which is reflected in this examination. His first observation is that the relationship between heresy and orthodoxy is dynamic in nature. Both Lactantius and Firmicus demonstrate how "orthodoxies grapple with, and eventually incorporate, deviant beliefs into their theoretical frame of reference, so as to neutralize them."<sup>5</sup> Initially, as a member of the orthodox, Lactantius attempts to incorporate the second god of the *Hermetica* into Christianity. Although

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<sup>3</sup> Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 180-182. See Fowden's notes these pages for further reference to Cyril.

<sup>4</sup> As has been outlined in previous footnotes, tracing the lineage of pagan uses of Hermes in a dissertation will follow the line of Plotinus through Porphyry, who figures so prominently in the Christian authors discussed here, through Iamblichus and on to Julian's failed attempt at a pagan revival.

<sup>5</sup> J. Berlinerblau, "Toward a Sociology of Heresy, Orthodoxy, and Doxa," in *History of Religions* 40:4 (May, 2001): 332.

conceptually acceptable to Arius, this definition does not build sufficient distance between pagan and Christian. The conflict with Arius and the changes made at Nicaea leads to Berlinerblau's second axiom that heresy requires a political organization to define it.<sup>6</sup> The conversion of Constantine and the political reorganization flowing from this event may be a basis for understanding the politics of heresy, but the conversion of Firmicus Maternus focuses on the larger issues of the application of symbolic power in defining belief, and creating borders. Firmicus is at the center of "symbolic struggles over the power to produce and to impose the legitimate vision of the world."<sup>7</sup> Christians like Firmicus have changed their role from conciliators to eliminators, not only of pagan rights and sacred places but of the pagan hold on defining reality. The place of demons, the Sun, and the operation of Fate are distinct pagan cognitive structures eliminated in favor of Christ the Savior.<sup>8</sup> Stripping the pagan belief system of its most powerful operatives is a step in the process of the new Christian group asserting its political power, its right to define itself and to reshape the intellectual world around it.

### ***The Corpus and Heresy***

Firmicus's role also points to Berlinerblau's final axiom that the heretic exists as a "structural insider." Berlinerblau asks what specific criteria define the heretic as an insider; is it shared beliefs and values, membership in an elite group, or a common discursive universe which the heretic then upsets?<sup>9</sup> As Christianity built stronger borders between Christian and non-Christian, I propose that Firmicus Maternus be seen not merely as a polemical, new convert to Christianity, but as a pagan heretic. Bringing with him a deep knowledge of pagan practice and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 332-335.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," in *Sociological Theory*, 7:1 (Spring, 1989): 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>9</sup> Berlinerblau, 334-335.

ritual, Firmicus turns viciously against his former co-practitioners. Key to forming the border between Christian and pagan, Christian legislation and efforts towards self-definition thrust upon pagans the need to see themselves as a group, perhaps for the first time. It is from this group, as defined by Christians, that heretics like Firmicus emerged. Boyarin employs the concept of Jewish response to explain an emergent Judaism as well; that only in its successful response to Christian attempts to label it a religion did Rabbinic Judaism itself come into existence.<sup>10</sup> Here also is tacit acknowledgement of Bourdieu's assertion that symbolic power is actually the power to define groups. Evidence that "pagans" may have begun to see themselves as such a group is found in Julian's attempt to use Iamblichus (and his dependence on Hermes) in defining a set of practices and beliefs, a doctrine, to oppose "the Galileans." If Rabbinic Judaism succeeded in mounting an intellectual defense against Christianity by rejecting and refusing "the Christian definition of a religion, understood as a system of beliefs and practices to which one adheres voluntarily," then paganism failed.<sup>11</sup> Firmicus is then fully an insider of this defined group which Christianity labels as opposing. He shares the same discursive framework as his Neoplatonic cohorts and falls into the category of "intellectuals who dissent from the very orthodoxy to which they once belonged."<sup>12</sup> The references to the *Corpus Hermeticum* used here helps frame the shared beliefs and values that allow Firmicus to move from one group to another. The intellectual activity he once performed in pagan discourse included articulating the role of divine intermediaries in the operation of Fate, which makes his reversal on the role of the Sun in *De Errone* so striking after his conversion. The role of Christ as the only mediator between God

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<sup>10</sup> Boyarin, 218-220.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>12</sup> Berlinerblau, 340.

and humanity forms the basis for attacks on paganism in all three authors, helping to form the border between pagan and Christian.

### **The *Corpus* and *Doxa***

Finally, the uses of *Corpus Hermeticum* help to reveal the intellectual landscape or “substrate” of Late Antiquity. Bourdieu identified *doxa* as the “unthought assumptions” and “fundamental beliefs which do not even need to affirm themselves”.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, he refers to “habitus” as “the mental structure through which (one) apprehend(s) the social world” which allows members of a society “to perceive the world as natural and to accept it much more readily than one might imagine.”<sup>14</sup> It is no coincidence that these Christian authors chose the *Corpus Hermeticum* first for incorporation and only later for attack. It is the *Corpus Hermeticum* that presents the existent intellectual world of Late Antiquity from which Christianity must distinguish itself. Additional work on Arian doctrine, the accusations against Eusebius of Caesarea of Hermetic influence, and the works of Philo of Alexandria will lend further support to this supposition.<sup>15</sup> Berlinerblau proposes a number of questions that further research on the *Corpus* in Late Antiquity may serve to answer. “What is the ‘unquestioned and unified cultural tradition’ that binds together these adversaries?” In this case, the adversaries are the newly forming orthodox Christians and their Arian/pagan contemporaries. He also asks “if *doxic* commonalities exist only among (antagonistic) coreligionists.”<sup>16</sup> The *Corpus Hermeticum* answers this question with a resounding negative. The creation of orthodox Christian belief is

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>15</sup> Philo of Alexandria is another author that figures prominently in discussions of a “second god.” Whether there is direct contact between Philo and the Hermetica requires further research. See Ch. 5 of Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 112-127 for a complete discussion of Philo and “The Jewish Life of the Logos.” Boyarin does not cite Hermes in his discussion of this facet of Philo’s belief.

<sup>16</sup> Berlinerblau, 348. All three of these quotations occur on this page.

arrayed not just against Arian coreligionists, but against pagan Hermetists and (through the work of Boyarin) Judaeo-Christians as well. One final question he asks is “does the heretical impulse incline to appear among dominant or subaltern strata?” Here, the *Corpus* may prove the most intriguing because it suggests that the process of Christian orthodoxy creation is a subaltern reaction against a dominant multi-religious background. The path of *Corpus* references from the tacit incorporation of Lactantius, to the vehement attack of Firmicus, to the enlightened negligence of Augustine follows the growth of orthodox belief from insecure minority to holder of symbolic power separating right belief from wrong.

Augustine’s death in 430ce at the hands of the Vandals marks a turning point both for Christianity and the *Corpus Hermeticum*. For Christianity, the year 431ce ended with the Council of Ephesus and a definition of the nature of Christ that paralleled Augustine’s foundational concept of Christ as the only mediator. His attack also marked a transition in interpretation of the *Corpus*, from a philosophical alternative to Christianity, to (at best) a supporting legend for its birth.<sup>17</sup> Both the philosophical and practical aspects of the Hermetica, its magical and alchemical treatises, would survive and inform the alchemy of Islam, eventually to arrive in ninth century Byzantium. By the eleventh century, the Hermetic treatises arrived in the hands of Michael Psellus, a Byzantine scholar who despised magic. It is possible that the collection of Hermetica that makeup the modern *Corpus Hermeticum* may have been redacted by Psellus to expunge any distasteful magical writings while leaving intact those philosophical texts that seemed to support the rise of Christianity. Psellus may have inadvertently separated the two branches of Hermetic writing to such a degree that its Late Antique origins disappeared, allowing

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<sup>17</sup> Exploring the question of whether “Hermeticism” really was an alternative to Christianity or may have been a failed religion will also be the subject of ongoing research. For a definition of religion including “priests, rites, rules, and sacrifices”, see Boyarin, 204. For a discussion of magic as “the products of a disintegrating religion” see A. R. Barb, “The Survival of Magic Arts,” in *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. Arnaldo Momigliano (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 100-125.

Renaissance interpreters (much to the chagrin of Augustine) to push Hermes even farther into the past, strengthening his claim on authority, and their fascination for his writing.<sup>18</sup> Returning to 1463ce and the desk of Marsilio Ficino, the *Corpus* entered a new phase of its long career, becoming the handbook of the Renaissance Magus in the flood of books made possible by the printing press, but that is a story left to another chapter.

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<sup>18</sup> Copenhaver, xl-xli.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Charles Flowers is a computer programmer by trade, a historian by desire. He first graduated from the University of Florida in 1993 with a bachelor's degree in computer engineering. Working as a programmer and then manager of programmers, Charles was the person who returned after a long day's work to pick up a book of Medieval history as a form of relaxation. He came to a point in his life when an adventure was needed; a break from the traditional. With the encouragement of friends and family, he broke with the working world in 2005 to enter the rarefied halls of academia.

His area of academic interest has steadily moved backward in time from the Medieval period to Late Antiquity, and south from the moist lands of Europe to the deserts of North Africa and the Middle East. The formative period of Early Christianity in the 2<sup>nd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> centuries holds special interest. Tracing the development and separation of Christianity from the Judaic and pagan milieu is his current focus. Working currently with the *Corpus Hermeticum* and in the future with Julian the Apostate, Iamblichus, and Arius he is also interested in the role of power in defining the concept of orthodoxy. An early version of this thesis was first read at the 42<sup>nd</sup> International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan in the Spring of 2007.

After graduating with a master's degree in history in 2008, Charles entered the PhD program at the University of Florida. Continuing his work on religion and power in Late Antiquity, future chapters of a PhD dissertation will include the role of anti-Nicene, pagan, and early Jewish thinkers in the formation of borders between the orthodox Christian community and the formation of the "Other."