

# ALBERT CAMUS ON CHRISTIAN METAPHYSICS AND NEOPLATONISM

J. Larson

Waseda University, Japan

## บทคัดย่อ

เราจะพบกับข้ออ้างพื้นฐานของปรัชญาศีลธรรมและจริยศาสตร์เชิงมนุษย์นิยมของ อัลแบร์ต กามูส์ ได้จากงานวิทยานิพนธ์ของเขาเกี่ยวกับ อภิปรัชญาแบบคริสต์และลัทธิเพลโตใหม่ สำหรับ “Diplôme d'études” ในปี 1936 ที่ประเทศแอลจีเรีย บทความนี้จะตรวจสอบความคิดเห็นของกามูส์เกี่ยวกับ โพลติอัส ออกัสติน เปลาจีอุส และความคิดแบบปัจเจกวิวัฒน์นิยม และเน้นหนักไปในประเด็นของคริสต์ ซึ่งกามูส์ยังคงสืบเสาะค้นหาในบทความด้านปรัชญาและงานเขียนด้านวรรณกรรมของเขา

## Abstract

Albert Camus' moral philosophy and his search for a humanistic ethics find their basic premises in the academic dissertation that he wrote on Christian metaphysics and Neoplatonism for the *Diplôme d'études* in Algeria in 1936. This paper examines Camus' ideas on Plotinus, Augustine, Pelagius, and Gnostic thought and focuses on the Christian themes that he continued to explore in his philosophical essays and his literary works.

Camus states in the beginning of his dissertation that its primary aim was to distinguish the two basic lines of thought of early Christianity and later Greek philosophy (mainly Neoplatonism), as two paradigmatic and deeply influential modes in which human beings deal with their finitude, their embeddedness in nature, and their ideas about their relationship with God. Camus also sought to show how these two powerful onto-theological traditions came together through Gnosticism and Neoplatonism to form the theo-

logical and philosophical ideas, as well as the problems, that Christianity would create for Western civilization.

By tracing the development of philosophical and religious thought during the period when Christianity and the Greek world first came into contact, Camus examines the differences in worldviews between two deeply influential intellectual currents and the values inherent in both of them. And throughout his life he would continue to compare and contrast Mediterranean and European values and their different philosophical perspectives.

The Mediterranean origins of all the key philosophers, especially in the case of Augustine, from Camus' own homeland, was extremely significant for him. In Augustine and his masterful synthesis of the Greek and Christian speculative thought, Camus attempted to show a unification of theology and philosophy, which created the historical and philosophical conditions upon which Western civilization would be built, and which would come into crisis in the modern age, particularly in the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It can also be argued that early Christian metaphysics and late Hellenistic philosophy left a positive trace in Camus' thinking and writing, if only because of the grand visions and poetic force of these writings.

## **EARLY CHRISTIANITY AND THE GREEKS**

According to the young Camus, in its early stages Christianity was not a philosophy but a faith or “a gamut of inspirations” that operated on a very different plane than that of the Greek world.<sup>1</sup> In Hellenism, by contrast, Man had the primary responsibility for determining his destiny and explaining the universe and his relationship with the gods and Nature.<sup>2</sup> In this world knowledge was the highest good and its attainment made the wise Man an equal of God. The Good was simply defined in terms of knowledge and viewed as a superior form of it.

In turn, all human finitude was interpreted as a lack of knowledge, and ignorance and incomplete knowledge was seen as the real reason for human limitations and what caused them to err. It was those limits that defined the human condition and Man's tragic fate. Most significantly, Camus highlights the fact that Nature was the background that defined the way that the Greeks viewed the world. It was a cyclical world; a world that operated on an aes-

thetic plane where the concept of beauty, structure, and order were held in the highest esteem (as were virtues); where the body was closely connected to Nature; and Man's purpose was to accept and celebrate this connection.<sup>3</sup>

## NATURE AND EVIL

Christianity, on the other hand, saw Nature not as something that humans must find a place in, and learn to perfect in themselves, but as something that they must escape from. From the Christian belief that Nature is matter and that matter is evil, the logical conclusion is drawn, as Camus shows, that this world is clothed in a darkness of sin and suffering.<sup>4</sup> Christians saw it as a world of punishment and wretchedness where humans seek some form of salvation to release them from the bondage of misery and woe. In this view, the function of sin is to make humans conscious of their pride, wretchedness, and imperfection.<sup>5</sup> In short, Nature and the world is a lightless morass of evil that humans are thrown into and where, more specifically, the flesh of the body is a symbol of death and evil.

Camus devotes a large section of his dissertation to the beliefs and teachings of some of the Gnostics, where he shows that they all shared an obsession with the problem of evil. He writes that "The importance of evil can be gleaned from the writings of even the least known Gnostic. The same is true of all Gnostic sects."<sup>6</sup> This Manichean dichotomy of Good and Evil in the world created a structure of thought and division into absolutes that separated God and humans and made their unity an impossible task. It also placed a hierarchical value in the relationship of God, Humans, and Nature. Finally, it directed human perceptions not only toward the abstract and toward an object that would do more than anything else to give meaning or identity to human existence through an idea of Absolute Unity.<sup>7</sup>

The crucial moment came when the Greek mode of thinking, i.e., the relationship between the realm of God and the human realm, based on a cyclical and ordered view of Nature and a faith in the power of reason, became more specific as it came into contact with a Judeo-Christian world that was based on the concept of a transcendent and all-powerful God, and the attendant concepts of faith, revelation, and teleology. This union was later shaped and influenced by the Gnostics and Neoplatonism, and Camus delineates four

stages in this evolution: the Gospel, Gnosis, Neoplatonism, and Augustinian thought. The first major theme around which this synthesis of Greek and Judeo-Christian speculation revolved is the problem of death.<sup>8</sup>

## DEATH AND THE INCARNATION

While the Gnostics may have been obsessed with evil, Camus writes that early Christians were obsessed with the idea of imminent death. This was connected with the second coming (or parousia) of Christ, as well as the belief in the end of the world.<sup>9</sup> Two essential states of mind emerged from this: pessimism and hope, the first referring to the tragic plane of death attached to this world and the second referring to the hope and faith in God and the desire to be transported beyond this world and beyond the realm of Nature. One had to choose between this world and God, from the sensible world to that of an intangible world not marked or bounded by perceptible limits, but an infinite expanse made even more distant by the apparent gap between this world and the other. This distance was so vast that no one could hope to bridge it, and since man was unable to reach God, only despair was open to him. Despite Man's wretchedness and his pleas for salvation, the immeasurable distance remained filled with an unresponsive silence.<sup>10</sup>

There is no need to insist on the great significance of this kind of analysis in view of Camus' later writing, both philosophical and literary. It is clear that in the early Christian writers Camus found a duality of pessimism and hope, a dialectic of necessary despair and illusory hope counterbalanced by the opposite dialectic of necessary hope and fruitless despair. Articulated in highly speculative, theological and philosophical arguments, this dialectic provided a fundamental mode of approaching the world that would be the hallmark of his later philosophy of the Absurd and his very specific brand of "existentialism."

With the Incarnation, which Camus calls the "privileged theme" and the center of Christian thought, the gap was bridged and the two realms were finally connected.<sup>11</sup> In Camus' words: "Man being unable to rejoin God, God comes down to man,"<sup>12</sup> which is a reverse of the process of Plotinus' Soul's ascent up the ladder to The One. In the figure of Christ, God's will is seen operating, and Camus cites Paul's comment that the sole purpose of this will

was to save mankind. This act of will is seen as God's second revelation. After the first revelation in the Creation, the second revelation is Redemption.

By doing so, however, God comes into the material world through the *Word made Flesh*. Here Judeo-Christian thought provides its own solution to the mystery of the link between God, Nature, and Man. Through the Incarnation, God is no longer an abstraction or numenon: He becomes in a sense finite. By taking on flesh through Christ, God becomes earthly reality, forever uniting Himself with human thought, whilst at the same time, making this relationship more problematic. For in connecting human thought with a more finite and personified God through the body of Christ, the seeds of the "death of God" are already sown, which under Nietzsche and other existential thinkers would explicitly develop many centuries later.<sup>13</sup>

The *Word became Flesh*; God became Man; and Christ's purpose was to take on the burden of our sins. As such, the person of Christ functioned in the same way as the ancient Greek scapegoat which purified the people and the city from its evils and then was driven out and killed in the form of a blood sacrifice.<sup>14</sup> In Camus' words:

The only way to save us was to come to us, to take our sins from us by a miracle of grace, namely Jesus, of our race, of our blood, who acts on our behalf and has taken our place. Dying with Him and in Him, man has paid for his sins, and the Incarnation is at the same time the Redemption.<sup>15</sup>

Nothing, Camus writes, is as specifically Christian as this idea of the Incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ in determining and developing the thinking and the ideas that will come to be known as Christianity. From this one central tenet the evolution of its theology and philosophy develops through the dialectic that it will create through years of opposing thoughts and heresies and the works of the apologists, eventually pushing it toward the structure of orthodoxy or dogma that will result in the construction of an institution of power and influence.<sup>16</sup>

Camus' emphasis on the body, on sensual experience as a locus where the world is revealed in its truth and the absurd is vanquished, is somehow the heir to this highly ambiguous Christian teaching of God made flesh. Early Christian speculation thus created the conditions for the emergence of institu-

tions that modernity and postmodernity would strive to dismantle, but also captured, in theological and metaphysical garments, the sacred value of sensuous experience and bodily interaction with the world. In a sense, one might say that Camus' work attempts to write a dechristianized version of the theories of the Incarnation and the Redemption.

## PHILOSOPHY, KNOWLEDGE, AND FAITH

Against the Greek ideas of knowledge and truth, as in principle attainable through philosophical speculation, stood the Christian ideas that knowledge is faith and that Man sinned or did evil not out of a lack of knowledge or ignorance, but by the very nature of existing.<sup>17</sup> Only faith was necessary for salvation. Indeed, the importance of evil or sin is probably even more decisive between these two systems than those of the Incarnation or Redemption, because it is sin and guilt that made the Incarnation and Redemption necessary.<sup>18</sup>

The rational knowledge of the Greeks and the religious faith of the Christians were two competing epistemologies that not only had to do with the limits of knowledge, but also the limits of the human will and the idea of sin, as the early heresies illustrate. For example, Camus quotes Clement as saying that "Greek philosophy is merely a produce of human intelligence: it does not teach the truth", and Camus relates that the opinions of the Christians in Alexandria was that "Faith is sufficient for man and all else is literature."<sup>19</sup>

The opposition of reason and faith or Greek philosophy and Christianity reached its climax in works of Pagan philosophers like Celsus and Porphyry, who criticized the beliefs of Christianity and whose intellectual revolt was met with a forceful response from the early Church by Origen in his *Against Celsus*, and to a lesser degree by Macarius Magnes in his *Apocriticus*. As R. Joseph Hoffman has shown:

The criticism of Christianity for its lack of a coherent philosophical system--a criticism which cannot easily be separated from the sociomoral attacks on the sort of people who found the new religion appealing--becomes a fixture of pagan polemical writing from the mid-second century onward.

Celsus himself, in a famous passage, alleges that most Christians ‘do not want to give or receive a reason for what they believe’ but rather win converts by telling them “not to ask questions but to have faith”.<sup>20</sup>

It is primarily the opposition between these ideas of philosophical logic and faith that Neoplatonism sought to reconcile. In any case, this is how Camus viewed Neoplatonism, and the reason why it was significant to him early on. For him, Neoplatonism was “a constant effort to reconcile contradictory ideas with the help of a principle of participation, a principle which has a place solely in a logic divorced from space and time”.<sup>21</sup> These contrasting ideas of intellect and faith created a dialectic from Plotinus to Saint Augustine, or as Camus calls it a “dialogue between heart and reason”, where he says the truths of this dialectic could only be expressed in images. These images used by Plotinus and others served to “mould the intelligibles into a shape that can be grasped by the senses, to restore to intuition what belonged to Reason”.<sup>22</sup> In other words, Plotinus served as a mediator by joining the intellect with artistic images that could be understood on the sensible level of parables. This explains Camus’ comment that these two systems of thought met “on the plane of philosophy”.<sup>23</sup>

Heart and reason and religious and philosophical thinking were brought together to create new frames of reference that helped to solve the problems that were raised by applying logic and doctrinal questions to a system of faith. Neoplatonism used the rational structures of Greek philosophy to construct the fundamental premises as well as the dialectic that created the basic truths of Christianity, and nowhere was this seen more clearly than in the writing of Saint Augustine, who borrowed many of his ideas from Plato, Plotinus, and Porphyry.

## **SAINT AUGUSTINE**

Camus wrote of Augustine that his philosophy assimilated “all the uncertainties and vicissitudes of Christian thought”.<sup>24</sup> While Augustine was a follower of Manichaeism, (which Camus calls a mere continuation of Gnosticism, primarily because of its focus on evil and death), it was the writings of

Saint Ambrose and the Neoplatonists that led to his conversion, as Augustine relates in his *Confessions*.<sup>25</sup>

Camus claims that the problem of evil obsessed Augustine, and while he was “Greek” in his need for rational coherence, Augustine was plagued with anxieties. It is this conflict between the mind and emotions that led him away from Manichaeism in search of other forms of truth as he wrestled with the carnal and the spiritual.<sup>26</sup> Camus writes that “it seemed to him above all that the solution was not to be found in knowledge, that the resolution of his doubts and of his distaste for the flesh did not lie in intellectual escape but in the total acknowledgement of his depravity and wretchedness”.<sup>27</sup> In his search for faith and truth, Augustine ended up transforming Neoplatonism into Christianity.<sup>28</sup>

According to Camus, the greatest contribution of Plotinus to Augustine’s thinking was the “doctrine of the Word as mediator” and “a solution to the problem of evil”, while the most important ideas that Augustine sought in Neoplatonism were Christ, the Incarnation, and the Trinity.<sup>29</sup> It is on this basis that Augustine sought to unite Greek and Christian thought. If we list the themes that occupied most of Augustine’s writing, we see once again how Camus’ early encounter with Christian metaphysics provided him with a language to articulate his core beliefs and experiences. The basic Augustinian themes were: Happiness, Evil, Sin, Grace, Freedom, and Human Will.<sup>30</sup>

The Neoplatonists taught that evil was a privation, not a reality in itself and while Augustine agreed, according to Camus, he stated that there were two kinds of evil: natural and moral evil.<sup>31</sup> While natural evil results from the human condition or the wretched state and the tragedy of Man’s “fall” into Nature and matter, moral evil was sin as a direct result of the human will. Sin came from our being given free will by God, but this was tainted by the ill use we make of it.<sup>32</sup> Camus adds that “we have fallen so far that the proper exercise of free will is invariably to be traced to God alone”, which reinforces the idea that we, or our Soul, have fallen so far into matter and darkness that humans, basically, only have the will to sin.<sup>33</sup> In that state, humans have forfeited their free will and are in bondage, slaves to evil and matter, which explains their wretchedness. Once again, it is extremely tempting to see in such speculation an anticipation of Camus’ own anxieties, and to make the point that Camus will provide a dechristianized, secular version in his novels and plays of this deep feeling of “falling” and of Man’s unhappy state.

Unlike the Greek idea of virtue, Augustine believed that virtue without God is useless and beyond human capacity. God bestows grace, and on that basis virtue can be achieved. This is opposed to Plotinus' idea in *The Enneads* that the Soul turns toward virtue and that an ascent to The Good is achievable by contemplation and self-reflection.<sup>34</sup> With Augustine, morality and values find their primary source in God rather than humans. As Camus remarks, this makes the virtues of the pagans useless, since for the Christian these virtues can become faults and even sins, such as pride. It is not the pagan idea of virtues seen as a Good or a form of excellence through which the powers of human life and human potentials can be extolled, as in Plato and Aristotle, but the idea that Man's first duty is not to himself, but to God. For the Christian it is faith, not virtue, that is the beginning of grace. Believing in God is the first step in submitting to that grace.<sup>35</sup>

In speaking of Augustine's ideas of God and freedom, Camus then remarks that:

The grace of God is, in this context, totally arbitrary: man should simply put his trust in God. How then can one speak of Man's freedom? Precisely because our sole freedom is the Freedom to do wrong. Saint Augustine's final avowal on this question, vital for the Christian, is one of ignorance. God's will remains intact.<sup>36</sup>

This question of God's will and human freedom is most clearly seen in *The Plague* in the sermon of Father Paneloux where he made it clear that "this plague came from God, for the punishment of their sins",<sup>37</sup> and that "since it was God's will, we, too, should will it".<sup>38</sup>

## **AUGUSTINE AND PELAGIUS**

For Camus, Pelagius' substantial discussion of free will, choice, and sin was highly instrumental in shaping Augustine's philosophy.<sup>39</sup> Pelagius, like the later existentialists, believed that Man was created free; that he is able to choose between doing Good or Evil; and that this free will is a freedom or emancipation from God.<sup>40</sup> Of course the logical conclusion that one could

make from this statement would be that if a) Humans can choose, b) They can avoid sin, and therefore, c) Humans can be free from sin. This logical conclusion would render the Christian idea of original sin meaningless and would negate the need for grace, salvation, and ultimately the Incarnation. This is the reason behind the Pelagian heresy and Augustine's opposition to it. Pelagius' argument was that Adam was born mortal; his sin and the Fall were not our mistake; and therefore, his bad example should not condemn other humans. For Pelagius, grace was not something that could be given because creation itself was already a grace.<sup>41</sup>

For the young Camus, these theological disputes hide important truths about Man's freedom, God, and the reality of free will. He mentions the Council of Carthage (29 April 418 A.D.), where the teachings of Pelagius were attacked by the Church: "In general, this teaching puts its trust in man and scorns explanations which refer to the will of God. It is also an act of faith in the nature and independence of man". And Camus adds: "This thesis then, was above all a declaration of man's independence of God and a denial of that persistent need of the creator that is at the basis of the Christian religion".<sup>42</sup> What Camus could find in these old debates was already the kind of philosophical point made by later materialists and, of course, 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialists. Needless to say, questioning the "need for a creator" would also become one of his main intellectual endeavors.

Augustine countered Pelagius' teaching by saying that Adam was immortal; that he originally had the ability not to sin; that he already had a form of grace; and that he was free. This all changed, however, when Adam destroyed this happy state in Eden by committing the original sin.<sup>43</sup> Our corrupt nature stems from this and since our human nature is corrupted, without baptism and God's grace, we are damned. In essence, as a result of this we have no freedom not to sin. Humans are incapable of not sinning and we have no choice in this. We carry the original sin of Adam, and subsequently, are destined for Hell and Damnation unless we turn to God for salvation. Predestination is our fate and our only choice of history, since moral values exist *a priori*, and what limited freedom and actions we may have only exist within this linear movement of Time.<sup>44</sup>

With this idea of predestination and of Man's fate, salvation and grace become even more important, and Camus says that we depend on this idea of grace for three things: 1) "to protect us from our fallen nature", 2) "to believe

in the truths of the supernatural order”, and 3) “to enable us to act in accordance with these truths”.<sup>45</sup> We do have the freedom to reject or accept these graces, but as he puts it, our freedom is defined by this context and the concept of God, and freedom exists only within this context. What is most fascinating about his rendering of Augustine’s rejoinders to the Pelagian heresy is that, despite the fact that the latter already articulates the basic tenets of the existentialist position, Augustine continues to represent a positive reference and influence for him. It is as though the philosophical power and rhetorical mastery of his demonstrations contained some truth, beyond the untenability of the dogmas he defends. The relevance of the Augustinian idea of Man’s “fall” needs to be rescued, as it were, from its theological clothes and rewritten in the prose of the modern novel. Meursault and the penitent Jean-Baptiste Clamence of *The Fall* could be seen as later, secularized incarnations of Augustinian Man.

## THE TRINITY AND THE INCARNATION

In the last part of his dissertation, Camus focuses on Augustine’s idea of the Word Made Flesh and the concept of the Trinity. Whereas in Plotinus “the pure soul dwells with the intelligibles” in the realm of Intelligible Forms, and he stresses the gap or the distance that exists between The One and the Intellect,<sup>46</sup> for Augustine the ideas (Plato’s Ideal Forms) are like the first forms, which are eternal and unchangeable (and therefore true or absolutes). These ideas represent God or at the very least the divine presence in them.<sup>47</sup> Augustine thus places the emphasis on God, from which all things emanate, unlike Plotinus, who focuses on the Soul and the separation that exists between the three hypostases. Augustine’s focus on God is represented most clearly in the Trinity of God, Man, and Spirit, which rather than a hierarchy, forms a unity, where each part contains the others. By doing so, Augustine defines and closes the distance that separates these ideas or realms in Plotinus.<sup>48</sup>

Camus remarks that The Word in Augustine is, however, not the Intellect of Neoplatonism and of Plotinus. For Augustine the Word was made flesh in the Incarnation of Christ, in what amounts to God taking on human form in the miracle of the Incarnation.<sup>49</sup> Through the Word becoming Flesh, humans would now be able to participate in God on earth, not as something

that occurs only after death through the Soul's conversion and its return to a lost homeland. Christianity bridged the gap and the distance of silence that had characterized Man's relationship to God, thereby confirming that this separation was finally closed. As a result, one could say that Faith and Reason were also brought closer together, creating boundaries of thought that allowed the necessary elements for the beginning of Christian dogma.<sup>50</sup>

It is important to follow Camus' patient reconstruction of these dogmas, as it shows the extent to which he sought to salvage the figure of Augustine for his role in bringing together the best of Christian and Greek metaphysics through the synthesis of the philosophical frameworks of Plato, Plotinus, and the Gnostics, and through his understanding of the Incarnation and the Trinity. In Camus' words:

Saint Augustine ends where Plotinus' conversion culminates. They both pursue the same conclusion, but while their paths sometimes overlap, they are different nonetheless. Augustine asserts at every step that philosophy is not enough. The sole intelligent reason is that which is enlightened by faith.<sup>51</sup>

Again, Camus' paradoxical attraction to the Father of the Church is incontrovertibly represented here. What could easily appear as a dogmatic rejection of Man's true position in the world (free but finite) is interpreted by Camus in explicitly positive terms. Later on, just as for Augustine, philosophy won't "be enough" for Camus either. He will replace the trust in faith with a faith in sensual experience, engagement, and creation. However, he will always retain from Augustine the gesture of distrusting an overly rationalistic approach in dealing with the finitude of human existence.

Augustine's main contribution to Christianity was thus to "make Greek reason more supple and to fuse it with the Christian edifice, but in a sphere in which it can do no harm",<sup>52</sup> By contrast, the role of Neoplatonism was to "support this softening of Reason, to lure Socratic logic to religious speculations and so to transmit this tool, already fashioned, to the Fathers of the Christian Church".<sup>53</sup>

Camus quotes Augustine as saying, "If you cannot understand, believe so that you may understand. Faith comes first, understanding follows. Therefore do not seek to understand, but believe so that you may understand".<sup>54</sup> Reason must

be humble and pliant and in a subordinate position to Faith, and Camus writes that Faith in Augustine consists of two things: 1) the belief in supernatural truths, and 2) “man’s humble abandonment to the grace of God”.<sup>55</sup> Knowledge does not begin with reason, but with faith. The role of dogma is to give knowledge and certainty to that faith; critical reasoning is not important, but rather humility and submission. According to Camus, the Word or Logos that was brought into Christianity from Neoplatonism was not just Intellect, but God, and therefore Intellect is no longer just an effusion or emanation as in Plotinus, but a creation of God.<sup>56</sup> The Word, Dogma, and Truth become joined into a Logos, and God can now communicate with his creation.

Camus concludes his dissertation by remarking that some speak of a Hellenization of early Christianity and agrees that, as regards morality, this is a correct statement. However, as has just been shown, this is not the final truth of the matter. More significantly, Camus felt that Christian morality cannot be taught, because it is an “interior ascesis which serves to ratify a faith”.<sup>57</sup> Again we find here Camus’ paradoxical attraction to a form of moral teaching that escapes the strictures of rationalism and goes beyond all of his disagreements about content. Rather than a Hellenization of Christianity then, we should speak, he says approvingly, of the Christianization of a decadent Hellenism.<sup>58</sup> According to Camus, Nietzsche’s thesis was that Greece was a culture of “pessimism, insensible and tragic”, while Christianity was a renaissance compared to “Socratism and its serenity”.<sup>59</sup> Christian Man replaced the Greek one. Despite Camus’ sympathy for the Greek spirit, however, he finds himself attracted to the Christian translation of Greek speculation as carried out in most exemplary fashion by Augustine.

In the final paragraph, Camus says that by the time of Augustine’s death, Christianity had become a philosophy and that it was “sufficiently armed” to resist attacks against its basic tenets.<sup>60</sup> By this time the basic foundations of Christian thought had been constructed through the merging of Christian theology and Greek philosophy; through the suppression of the main heresies; and through the establishment of its basic themes and doctrines.<sup>61</sup> The last sentence of his dissertation reads:

For many years now it has remained the only hope and the only real shield against the misfortune of the Western world. In this way Christianity won its catholicity.<sup>62</sup>

This statement is highly significant in the context of Camus' philosophical thought. For at first glance the treatment in Camus' later writing of such themes as the death of God; the place of Man in the world; his relationship to Nature; the importance of the Body; the belief in Immortality; the problems of Evil, Sin, and Suffering; the need for Salvation; the powers of Reason and Knowledge; the nostalgia for Faith; the limits of Free Will, Freedom, and Human Happiness-appears as if it stands in sharp contrast and stark opposition to the Christianity that he presented in his dissertation. However, it should also, hopefully, be clear by now that the dissertation and the academic engagement with Christian metaphysics helped Camus gain invaluable insights into the continuing depth and magnitude of these early ideas, as they had engaged the minds of the early philosophers and theologians. What is most important is that Camus used these Neoplatonist and Christian themes to illuminate the travails of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to show how these fundamental themes were still crucially relevant to the problems of human morality and moral philosophy.

As Camus develops his thinking on the absurd, nihilism, the human condition, and the dangers and necessity of revolt, what appears is a philosophy that reflects a continuous dialogue questioning, yet constantly finding inspiration from, the basic premises and early formations of Christian thought and natural law. In his dissertation, Camus learned the full significance of these notions despite his rejection of the dogmas. Camus' materialist and "pagan" viewpoints, and his "Greek" affinities, led him to emphasize the concrete realities of human morality, ethics, happiness, justice, and social existence, where Man is placed at the center of importance rather than the absolutes and ideologies of religious and political systems. However, Camus' Man is also, in some ways, a "detranscendentalized" version of the fallen Augustinian Man.

The literary works and the philosophical essays of Camus that follow his dissertation all reflect the Christian influences outlined in this work. These early Christian ways of perceiving and identifying the problems of human existence were translated into the main problems that would shape his own philosophical thought, i.e., the realities of human existence, Man's need for religious certainties and political absolutes, and the problems of moral and political action. When one examines Camus' opposition to the Christian worldview and its philosophy, we are better able to understand the influences that shaped

his religious and political thinking; his moral philosophy; where this dialogue with Christianity led him in his search for meaning and value; and his vision of the tragic nature of human existence.

J. Larson teaches philosophy at Waseda University and lectures at Sophia University in Tokyo, Japan. He can be contacted at: [jl Larson@gol.com](mailto:jl Larson@gol.com).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Joseph , Albert Camus: *Philosopher and Litterateur* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) 93.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 94.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 94-95. In Camus' opinion: "In the realm of nature, moreover, the Greeks also believed in a cyclical world, eternal and necessary, which could not be reconciled with creation ex nihilo and therefore with an end of the world" 94. Furthermore, "For a Christian who separates Reason from Beauty, the True from the Beautiful, Reason becomes merely the arbiter in questions of logic. And there can be conflicts between Faith and Reason. A Greek finds these encounters less acute, for Beauty, which is, at the same time, order and sensibility, harmonious arrangement and object of desire, remains an intelligible landscape: ..." 126. Camus writes in *Notebooks 1942-1951*: "Historicity leaves unexplained the phenomenon of beauty; in other words, relations with the world (sentiment of nature) and with persons as individuals (love)" (136), and "Greece introduced the notion of order and harmony into morals, as she did into aesthetics" 122.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 96. Camus discusses Marcion's Gnostic view that there are two divinities: "one, the superior divinity, is lord of the invisible world. The other, his subaltern, is the God of this world" 115. Christ, as Camus reconstructs the Gnostic view, "is nothing less than the envoy sent by the Supreme God to do battle with the wicked God, the creator of the world, and to free man from his domination. Jesus accomplishes a revolutionary mission here below. If he redeems our sins it is because he combats, in them, the work of the cruel God. Emancipator and Redeemer, he is the author of a sort of metaphysical coup d'etat" 115. Camus says that as a result, Marcion proposes a morality based on an ascetic life and sexual abstinence to combat this material world and that "The goods of this world should be scorned out of hatred of the Creator: Marcion's ideal is to allow him least scope for his power" 116. The subject of matter, evil, and the corporeal body can be seen in the Orphic belief that "the body is the tomb of the soul". And Paul would later write in Romans 8:8: "those who are in the Flesh cannot please God".

<sup>5</sup>As Camus writes: "In sin man become conscious of his wretchedness and pride". He quotes from Paul's Epistle to the Romans: "I do not understand my own actions: for I do not the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do

what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but the sin which dwells within me” 100.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 114. While most definitions of Gnosticism place it in the historical periods of pre-Christianity and the early Christian era, scholars disagree as to its origins and even the term itself. For a good discussion of Gnosticism, see Karen L. King’s *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). See pages 111-124 of Camus’ dissertation for his discussion of Gnosticism

<sup>7</sup>A brief historical reminder might be useful here. Manichaeism was founded by the Persian Mani (216-c. 275 A.D.) and like Zoroastrianism, it held as its central belief a metaphysical dualism according to which the world consists of a battle between good and evil or light and darkness. The division of the world or universe into this dialectical contrast of Good and Evil influenced many religious and philosophical schools, especially the Pythagoreans and the early Christians. In this worldview, the subject/object relationship between humans and God also helps to define human nature and the human condition. God becomes the mirror of human actions leading to the idea that God sees all.

<sup>8</sup>Camus writes: “...the Gospel, Gnosis, Neoplatonism, Augustinian thought. We shall study these four stages of an evolution that is common to Greece and Rome, in their historical order and in the relationship that they maintain with the movement of thought in which they are inscribed” 97. All these stages will also become powerful themes in Camus’ work.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 99. Camus relates that at the end of the fourth century, the proconsular bishop of Africa, Julius Quintus Hilarianus, wrote that the world would end in 101 years (99). The idea of the parousia or the Second Coming of Christ in early Christianity and the teachings of Paul emphasized the apocalyptic vision or belief that “time was short”; that the end of the world was imminent; and only those who had faith in Christ would be saved.

<sup>10</sup>Camus remarks that “The distance between man and God is so great that no one can hope to bridge it” 102. This gap between God and humans and the despair that results from the silence that arises between them is a theme shared by many poets and writers at the time of Camus, most famously represented, for instance, in Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 98. Camus calls the Incarnation “...the point where the divine and the flesh meet in the person of Jesus Christ: the extraordinary adventure of a god taking upon himself man’s sin and misery, humility and humiliations being presented as so many symbols of Redemption”.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 102.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 102. Unlike the idea of an abstract force like daimon, kami, or endo, or spirit that exists as a field of power rather than a personified figure, the Christian God became finite and took on human form through Christ, and therefore become non-negatable and a “being” that came to be tied to mankind. See Samuel Beckett’s reference of being tied to Godot in Act I of *Waiting for Godot*.

<sup>14</sup>For a thorough discussion of the idea of the scapegoat and Christ as the sacrificial Lamb of God, see René Girard’s *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

University Press, 1986). Of the crowd who condemns Christ in front of Pilate, Girard comments: “Yet the crowd wins out; nothing is more important than this victory, nothing more significant for the revelation of the mechanism that selects a victim” 106-107.

<sup>15</sup>Op. cit., 102.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 103. Two important early pagan writings against Christianity were Celsus’ *On the True Doctrine*, which was countered by Origen in his *Contra Celsum*, and Porphyry’s *Against the Christians*, which was countered by several Christian writers, including St. Augustine. For an analysis and discussion of these two works, see R. Joseph Hoffman’s *Celsus On the True Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) and his *Porphyry’s Against the Christians: The Literary Remains* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1994). After the early evolution of Christianity and the merging of philosophy and theology, the next development would be joining these two with political power under Constantine.

<sup>17</sup>This whole problem of knowledge and truth is one that pits the two realms of the philosophical and the religious and the belief that only the Gods are omniscient. According to Alcmaeon, “Gods possess clear knowledge of matters invisible”. *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 2001) 36. As Heraclitus said, “For human ways have no insights, divine ways have”. 67.

<sup>18</sup>While religion and the belief in God allow for the possibility of absolution and redemption, in a world without God the problem of guilt and absolution become intractable. This is the subject that Dostoevsky struggled with in *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, and that Camus focused on in *The Fall*. For existential man and the philosophy of existentialism where God is absent, the question of how Man gets rid of his guilt and the judgment of others has no solution.

<sup>19</sup>Op. cit., 107.

<sup>20</sup>See R. Joseph Hoffman’s *Celsus: On the True Doctrine* 27.

<sup>21</sup>Op. cit., 139.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 139. This idea reflects Pascal’s comment that “the heart has a reason that the reason knows not of”. Pascal is mentioned at the beginning (100) and at the end of Camus’ dissertation 152.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 139.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 142.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 142. In his *Confessions* (London: Penguin, 1961), Augustine relates that he was an adherent of the Manicheans for nine years but that his encounter with Faustus and his apparent shortcomings led to a disenchantment. In Book V, Augustine talks about “The keen interest which I had had in Manichean doctrines was checked by this experience, and my confidence in the other teachers of the sect was further diminished when I saw that Faustus, of whom they spoke so much, was obviously unable to settle the numerous problems which troubled me” 99. He then goes on to explain the influence of Ambrose and his eventual preference for Catholic teaching (116).

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 142. Camus’ notebooks are filled with passages reminiscent of Augustine’s struggle with the carnal and the spiritual and the need for chastity In *Notebook 1935-1951*, he writes: “It is legitimate to glory in the diversity and quantity of

experience – and especially in the life of the senses and the surrender to passionate impulses – only if one is completely disinterested in the object of one’s desires. There is also the leap into material things-and many men who glory in the senses do so only because they are slaves to them. Here, too, they embrace the vulture which is eating them away. Hence the absolute necessity to have gone through the experience of chastity, for example, and to have been ruthless with oneself. Before any deliberately thought-out enterprise aimed at glorifying the world of immediate experience, a moment’s asceticism in everything” 162.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 142.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 142.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 143. Celsus accuses the Christians of worshipping a man rather than a god (the heresy of Arianism), which precludes them from being called monotheists (116). Hoffman makes the statement in the *Notes* that “Such attacks as these stand behind later philosophical defenses of the unity of the godhead, and issue finally in the credal definitions of the fourth century” (*Note 197*) 142. By “unity of the godhead”, Hoffman is referring to the concept of the Trinity, which was codified at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. Camus discusses the conflict over Christ’s divinity between Arius and Athanasius and the role of the Neoplatonists in solving this problem: “The Nicene Creed (325 A.D.) states the principle of consubstantiality and opposes the begotten Christ to the created Jesus of Arius...” 140.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 143. Olivier Todd in *Albert Camus: A Life*. (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1997), relates the following story in his biography, which is particularly telling: when a Dominican priest told Camus that he had not found grace, Camus replied: “I am your Augustine before his conversion. I am debating the problem of evil and I’m not getting past it” 230.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 144.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 144.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 144. Camus quotes Augustine for whom “Man’s sole possession is deceit and sin” 100.

<sup>34</sup>See the section on virtues in Plotinus’ *The Enneads* (London: Penguin, 1991) on pages 15-23, and the section on conversion on pages 338-229.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 144. This contrast between Christian faith and Greek virtues, between an absolute God and the importance of human character runs through the *Notebooks* and shapes Camus’ moral reflections. For instance, Camus makes the statement in *Carnets III* that “Character is not virtue which we have: it is acquired” 15. Human character and action are bounded by vices and virtues and their extremes. This is reflected in Camus’ comments in *Notebooks 1935-1951*: “an extreme virtue that consists in killing one’s passions. A deeper virtue that consists in balancing them” 187; “There are some temptations which are so strong that they must be virtues” 134; and in *Notebooks 1942-1951* “All great virtues have an absurd aspect” 27.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 144-145. Compare this idea to Pascal’s Wager and Kierkegaard’s Leap of Faith on putting your faith in God. This idea is also connected to predestination and the teleological belief in history as God’s design or will, which is a major tenet in divine

natural law theory. We will return to this in the concluding chapter.

<sup>37</sup>Camus, *The Plague* 83. It is interesting to note that in the novel, Father Paneloux is conducting research on St. Augustine and the African Church. See page 78.

<sup>38</sup>Camus 184.

<sup>39</sup>Op. cit., 145. According to the online *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Pelagius “denied the primitive state in paradise and original sin..., insisted on the naturalness of concupiscence and the death of the body, and ascribed the actual existence and universality of sin to the bad example which Adam set by his first sin. As all of his ideas were chiefly rooted in the old, pagan philosophy, especially in the popular system of the Stoics, rather than in Christianity, he regarded the moral strength of man’s will (*liberum arbitrium*), when steeled by asceticism, as sufficient in itself to desire and attain the loftiest ideal of virtue” 2. The article also discusses Pelagius’ friendship with Caelestius; Caelestius’ six theses, which were deemed heretical and reflected the main ideas of Pelagianism; Augustine’s response; and the attempts by the Church to counter Pelagius’ teachings, which culminated in the Council of Carthage in 418 A.D. (5) See [www.newadvent.org/cathen/11604.html](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11604.html)

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 146. The logic here is that human reason, while given by God, is imperfect and that it can be used incorrectly, resulting in both sin and the need for faith.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 146. The debates about Predestination between Dr. Rieux and Father Paneloux constitute one of the main themes in *The Plague*.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 146.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 147.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 147.

<sup>48</sup>The notion of the Trinity and Christ’s divinity were defined and codified at the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), presided over by Constantine, and at the second, third, and fourth councils held at Constantinople (381 A.D.), Ephesus (431 A.D.), and Chalcedon (451 A.D.). The first three councils also dealt with the heresies of Arius, Macedonius, and Pelagius. For an account of these councils, see *The Catholic Encyclopedia* online at ([www.newadvent.org/cathen](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen)).

<sup>49</sup>Op. cit., 148.

<sup>50</sup>In contrast to the emanations of the hypostases outlined in Plotinus, which were understood as manifestations of light and the soul descending into matter, Logos or the Word of God in Christianity was transmitted first through the law of Moses and then took on flesh in the Incarnation of Christ. This fundamental difference in the conception of “manifestation” was at the heart of the philosophical and theological disputes between the pagan philosophers and the early Christians. These debates directly informed the dogmas of the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ. It is important to keep this historical-philosophical background in view given the importance of both these elements in Camus’ writing and thinking. In rediscovering these old debates, Camus saw at play gigantic struggles, waged simultaneously in thought and politics,

over the exact definition of the tragic paradigm. For the section on the three hypostases, see Plotinus' *The Enneads* on pages 347-360.

<sup>51</sup>Op. cit., 149.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 149-150.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 151.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 151. While Camus may make the statement that Christian morality cannot be taught, it is quite clear that the Church and governments have tried to do just that, and in many ways, the fate of Meursault in *The Outsider* reflects the consequences when someone refuses to accept that morality.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 126.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 152. See this other amazing passage in *The Birth of Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), which speaks directly to Camus' Nietzschean interpretation of the differences between Neoplatonism to Christian metaphysics: "If one can still speak of 'Greek serenity', then only as the cheerfulness of slaves who know no graver responsibility, no higher ambition, nothing in the past or future of higher value than the present. This appearance of 'Greek cheerfulness' was what so outraged profound and fierce natures in the first four centuries of Christianity. It seemed to them that his womanish flight from all that was grave and frightening, this cowardly contentment with comfortable pleasure, was not simply despicable, but was the true anti-Christian attitude of mind" 56-7. In his Introduction to Nietzsche's work, Raymond Geuss comments that the key point for Nietzsche was affirmation, and "since both Schopenhauer and Christianity agree that *this* world is not to be affirmed, they are really instances of the same kind of weakness, and the difference in their metaphysical views (that the Christian thinks the underlying *reality* of the world, God, is to be affirmed while Schopenhauer thinks this underlying reality, the Will, is to be negated) is irrelevant" (xxvii). Such opposition between Nietzschean affirmation and Christian negation of the world finds its way most famously in the last chapter of Camus' *The Outsider* in the confrontation between the Priest and Meursault.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 152. Hoffman argues that "The moral critiques of Christianity antedate the philosophical assaults of writers like Celsus for an obvious reason: the Christianity of the first century had yet to develop an assailable system of belief or fixed canon of writings from which such beliefs could be deduced. It is only as doctrine begins to supplant apocalyptic enthusiasm and the practices associated with it that the focus of pagan writers shifts from what Christians do to what they teach..." *Celsus* 24.

<sup>61</sup>With the Emperor Constantine, this theology and philosophy would be united with political power, giving Christianity military, legal, and spiritual authority.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 152.

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