Three areas spring immediately to mind when considering the context of Augustine’s intellectual endeavour with a focus on polemical and theological writings in early Latin Christian literature, 1) Tertullian, Cyprian, Novatian, and the third/early fourth century apologists, 2) the aftermath of the Arian controversy that saw the rise of writers such as Hilary of Poitiers and Ambrose of Milan, and 3) Augustine’s own time with its various controversies, against Manichaeans, Donatists, Pelagians and writings related to the ongoing discussions about the nature of God and Christ, in the aftermath of the Council of Constantinople (381) and in the run-up to the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451).

It makes sense to link the terms “polemical” and “theological” in this context, since early Christian theological writing emerged from a polemical discourse both within the early Church – against heretics – and without – against Jews and pagans – which was at the same time a process of delimitating the Church’s “true doctrine” against heresies as well as against non-Christian religious teachings and practices.

1. From Tertullian to Lactantius

Latin Christian polemical and theological literature erupted in the last decade of the second century with a loud bang, Tertullian.\(^1\) Born around 170, Tertullian, a resident of Carthage in Roman North Africa, wrote his main extant works in the years between 196 and 212. The breadth, depth and impact of his thought on later writers is proverbial. Augustine, who seems not to have liked him personally and treats him as a heresiarch and founder of the sect of “Tertullianists”,\(^2\) nevertheless had to admit to his enormous influence, and never hesitated to borrow from the many soundbites he had coined, among them, for example, the saying that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.\(^3\) Jerome, who dedicated a chapter to Tertullian in his work on “famous men”\(^4\), reports that the great bishop Cyprian of Carthage, who was martyred in 258, referred to him as “the master”.

As indicated in the introduction, Tertullian’s work was characterised by the need to delimitate Christian teaching and practice against Judaism and pagan religion as well as against variations within Christianity. As a dominant literary figure, Tertullian, although – seen from a later perspective – not entirely “orthodox” himself, nevertheless assumed a decisive position in formulating what became orthodox doctrine in Latin Christianity. He wrote apologies such as the famous *Apologeticum*, doctrinal works directed against heretics (e. g. *Against Marcion, Against Praxeas, Against the Valentinians*; and even a work entitled *Prescriptions against all heresies* is attributed to him) and also works on ascetic and ritual practice (e. g. *On Baptism* or *On Monogamy*).

In rhetorical terms an excellent polemicist, Tertullian, who was most likely as fluent in Greek as in Latin, was also closely interested in Biblical exegesis. He probably used the Bible in its Greek versions and translated passages according to his needs, since an authoritative Latin translation of the Bible most probably did not yet exist in his time.
He preferred literal interpretation but was able to use allegory as well. Ultimately, his biblical hermeneutics was guided by his anti-heretical and anti-Jewish polemics. It was in his polemical writings that Tertullian developed Latin theological terms and concepts which make him the single-most important early Christian theologian in Latin before (and arguably even beyond) Augustine. In his *Prescription against the Heretics* he holds the term *traditio* and the concept of a baptismal formula or “symbol” against the constant tendency to creatively vary and innovate Christian teaching. Ironically, in doing so he became himself one of the great innovators and creative theologians in early Christianity. In *Against Praxeas* he argued against modalism, the powerfully attractive and deceptively simple teaching that there was no differentiation in God, and that God, Father and Son, was simply one. Instead, he taught that there was a dynamic threeness in God, notwithstanding God’s oneness. In order to express this concept he used the term *substantia*, a first in Latin theology. In his view God was one *substantia*, though constituted of three. At this stage Tertullian still avoided the term *persona*, but the scene was set for later developments in Latin trinitarian theology. Finally, in *The Resurrection of the Flesh* and *The Flesh of Christ* he argued that in becoming man Christ really took on human flesh and that it was only because of this salvific act that the human flesh too would rise from the dead and attain eternal life. It must be appreciated that Tertullian made this intervention in an intellectual climate dominated by teachings that tended to exclude the flesh from salvation.

Within Tertullian’s life-time, in 203, dates the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity. This event left a literary trace, the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, which also had a significant influence on the development of Latin Christian theology during the third century. Theological themes developed in this work remained predominant in African theology throughout the following centuries such as the strong emphasis on martyrdom, purity over against evil, and the strong belief in a physical resurrection, which we saw also reflected in Tertullian’s thought.

Cyprian of Carthage provided the model of an African bishop and a considerable body of polemical and theological works. He influenced several competing Christian traditions in equal measure, above all the Donatist and the Catholic Churches of North Africa. From a well-to-do background he became bishop of Carthage only a few years after his conversion in around 246. He led the church through the Decian persecution in 250, but was criticised for avoiding martyrdom. In the years following the persecution a controversy broke out triggered by Novatian, who attacked the bishop of Rome for not being rigorous enough in excluding Christians who had lapsed during the persecution. In his work *On unity* Cyprian took a decisive stance in favour of the bishop of Rome and emphasized the importance of the Church as an institution and the bishop as its authoritative leader. “Outside the Church there is no salvation” and “one cannot have God as father if one does not have the Church as mother;” these are just two soundbites from that work which summarise two fundamental principles of African – and thereby ultimately the whole of early Christian Latin – theology and which indicate the strength of Cyprian’s influence on that theology.

Other works by Cyprian include a personal apology *To Donatus* (one could see it as an early type of “confessions”), a collection of Biblical testimonies on various questions *To Quirinus*, works on the Lord’s Prayer, on mortality, on almsgiving, on idolatry, and several more. One can see here reflected topics which Augustine too would have to take up as a bishop and which would manifest themselves in several of his works.
During the Great Persecution towards the end of the third and in the early fourth century two Latin apologists rose to fame whose works would greatly influence Latin theology during the decades to come, Arnobius and his pupil Lactantius. Both were North African professors of rhetoric, from Sicca Veneria (El Kef in today’s Tunisia), who became Christians relatively late in their lives and whose works are influenced by pagan philosophical teachings. Arnobius, for example, whose main extant work Against the Nations dates between 304 and 310 (during the Diocletianic persecution), seems to have believed in the mortality of the human soul, which is overcome by merits accrued during a person’s earthly life. With this he stood against the Neoplatonism of his time and its leading figure Porphyry (who also openly polemicised against Christians and seems to have played an intellectual role in the Great Persecution), and links up with a more materialist tradition represented by Epicureanism and its main Latin protagonist, Lucretius. Lucretian influence has more recently also been observed for Augustine himself.

Far more influential than Arnobius’ work, though written at about the same period, was that of his pupil Lactantius, entitled Divine Institutes. This work is crucial for the understanding of the development of Latin theology during the transitional early fourth century, especially since Lactantius rewrote it a few years later (ca. 313) and dedicated it to the newly acceded emperor Constantine, who had recently come out in favour of Christianity shortly after his victory in the battle at the Milvian Bridge in 312. Although very philosophical, even Gnostic, in outlook – an Augustinian concept of grace, for example, was alien to him – his polemical attitude to paganism nevertheless contained many affinities with Augustine’s later work, especially the City of God, where he can be found cited a number of times, not only passages from the Divine Institutes, but also from some of his other extant works such as The Workmanship of God, The Wrath of God, and the The Deaths of the Persecutors.

2. Milestones of the Latin Fourth Century

Lactantius’ profile remained rather strong in early fourth century Latin theological literature, partly because of his links to Constantine, who employed him at his court (as tutor to his sons), partly because of the apparent lack of other high profile theological writers in Latin during his lifetime. He died around 325, the year when the Council of Nicaea triggered a theological debate which was about to change Christianity for ever.

The impact of that debate, which was centred around the heretical teachings of Arius and the refusal of his adherents as well as a whole range of other theologians in the east to accept the Council’s formula that the Logos or Son (i.e. Christ) was “consubstantial” (homoousios) with God the Father, was at first not very strongly felt in the Latin west. It was only after the death of Constantine in 337 and the accession in the east of his son Constantius II., who supported or at least accommodated the opponents of Nicaea, that the Latin Church was gradually dragged into the conflict. Influenced by Nicene exiles such as Athanasius and Marcellus of Ancyra it eventually sided with the Nicenes.

The controversy also had a political side. Until 350 the west was ruled by Constans, who “supported ‘his’ [i.e. the Nicene] church in the west, and his brother Constantius did the same in the east”, i.e. he supported “his”, anti-Nicene (“Homoean”) church. In 351, after Constans had been killed by a usurper who was in turn defeated and killed by Constantius, Constantius took over the west and as a result also began to impose his ecclesiastical regime. For example, in 353 and 355, at councils in Arles and Milan, the
Nicene bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, who had already previously been banned in the east and lived in exile in the west, was now also condemned in the west. It was at this point that new high profile theological and polemical writers emerged in the west who resisted this development.

Outstanding among them was Hilary of Poitiers. Protesting against the new regime he was exiled to Phrygia, where he rallied support, learnt Greek and eastern theology, especially Origen, and wrote *On the Trinity*, commentaries on Matthew and the Psalms, and polemical works *On the synods* and against various representatives of the Imperial party (e. g. Auxentius the bishop of Milan, Dioscorus, Ursacius and Valens), including the emperor himself (*Against the emperor Constantius*). He assumed a similar role for the west as Athanasius represented it for the east, a champion of the Nicene cause. He died in 367/8.20

Another champion of the Nicene cause in the west was Ambrose of Milan. The son of a praetorian prefect he had been a provincial governor before he was controversially appointed bishop of Milan as head of the minority Nicene party in that city, replacing the above-mentioned Auxentius.21 His struggle for the Nicene cause was still ongoing when Augustine spent time in Milan between 384 and 387, even though he had already triumphed at the Council of Aquileia held in 381.22 Around this time (during the 380s) he wrote *On the Faith*,23 *On the Holy Spirit*, and *On the Incarnation of the Lord*. All three works engaged with crucial and controversial theological questions of the day (the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed, the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity, and the full humanity of Christ against the heresy of Apollinaris). In them Ambrose also made extensive use of Greek sources, especially works of Athanasius, Didymus and Basil of Caesarea. Jerome later even seems to have made veiled accusations that Ambrose had plagiarised these authors.24 But this strong dependency on Greek authors and the apparent lack of theological originality on Ambrose’s part only underline that he was one of the key mediators of Greek Nicene theology in the Latin west. His strength lay ultimately in using this theology, in its Latin form, which he had created, to help establish Nicene Orthodoxy politically in the west (both in secular and ecclesiastical terms) and push back the ‘Arian’ (= ‘Homoean’) faith which had found the support of several emperors from Constantius II. to Valentinian II.

Ambrose polemised not only against the ‘Homoeans’ of his time, but also against a resurgent Paganism, for example in the debate about the altar of the goddess Victory which the emperor Gratian had removed (for a second time) from the entrance of the Senate House in Rome and which a group of pagan senators, most prominent among them Quintus Aurelius Symmachus and Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, petitioned to be restored. Ambrose made certain that this initiative remained without success.25

Augustine experienced Ambrose first-hand during his residence in Milan between 384 and 387 and writes in *Confessions* 5.13.23 how he enjoyed “the sweetness of his oratory”. Drawing, among others, on Greek sources including, for example, Philo of Alexandria, Ambrose presented homilies on all manner of Old Testament topics, from the Paradise and Cain and Abel to Elijah and the book of Tobit.26 Other Greek sources used by Ambrose include Origen and Eusebius of Caesarea. Ambrose was also called upon to deliver orations on the deaths of the emperors Valentinian II. and Theodosius, which despite their panegyric character are important sources for theology and polemic, as they reflect many aspects of the struggle for Nicene Orthodoxy and against Paganism and heresy as mentioned above.27 Beyond that Ambrose wrote works on the ascetic life, e. g. *On virginity*, on catechesis (e. g. *On the Christian Mysteries*), numerous letters,
which he himself carefully edited and published as a collection, and hymns, some of which have survived until today.28

Ambrose died in 397, shortly after Augustine had become bishop of Hippo. It was only then that Augustine began to refer more openly to him in his works, for example, for the first time, in *Confessions.*29 After that period, references occur more frequently and during the Pelagian controversy Augustine copiously cites Ambrose (alongside Cyprian) as an episcopal peer, especially against the deposed and exiled bishop Julian of Aeclanum.30 Augustine also commissioned a biography of Ambrose from the latter’s former secretary, Paulinus of Milan, a work which became an indispensable source for the life of Ambrose. It has therefore been suggested that “at one level, Augustine has exerted a greater influence over Ambrose than vice versa.”31

While Hilary and Ambrose became models for the later bishop Augustine, another theologian who flourished around the middle of the fourth century resembled him in his African origins and his background as philosophically inclined rhetor, properties which also link him with Lactantius, namely Gaius Marius Victorinus. Victorinus was already of advanced aged when he became a Christian around 355. Active in Rome and highly acclaimed (a statue had been erected in his honour) he had written works on grammar and rhetoric, translated philosophical texts including Aristotle’s *Categories* and works by Plotinus and Porphyry, and engaged with Neoplatonic philosophy and Gnosticism. After he converted to Christianity he wrote commentaries on the Pauline epistles32 and commentarial works on the Nicene Creed, especially the concept of *homoousios*, which were at the same time polemical against its opponents, perceived by Victorinus to be Arius himself and his adherents. They include four books *Against Arius*, a treatise *On the Necessity of Accepting Consubstantiality*, and *Hymns on the Trinity.*33

Victorinus’ influence on Augustine cannot be overestimated. Augustine mentions him as a crucial mediator of Neoplatonic philosophy in Latin through his translations (*Confessions* 8.2.3), and he was also a model for him in the sense that he was a rhetor who seriously and existentially engaged with philosophy in a quest for wisdom.34 His technical excellence as a rhetor as well as his interest and competence in philosophy in connection with religion, these properties link Victorinus with both Lactantius on the one hand and Augustine on the other. He is one of the milestones in the fourth century for the emergence and development of a Christian Latin theology which was at the same time rhetorical, philosophical, exegetical – with regard to both “canons”, the Bible and the Creed! – and polemical (in the sense that it took sides and defended its orthodoxy against heresies as well as pagans and Jews).

3. Theological and Polemical Writing During Augustine’s Own Flourishing

Much of the literature produced during Augustine’s flourishing (386-430) is known to us through his engagement with it, be it Manichaeans, Donatists, Priscillians, Pelagians, pagans, Arians, or others. Only some of this literature can be briefly mentioned here.

From the 370s or 380s dates Tyconius’ *Book of Rules,*35 a complex work on Biblical hermeneutics which strongly influenced Augustine’s *On Christian doctrine.* It was the first major work of its kind in Latin and it is all the more interesting as its author was a Donatist. Its interest in developing a coherent method of interpreting Scripture in order to detect its true meaning was shared by Augustine. It is mentioned here because it also contained crucial thoughts on Christology, Ecclesiology and Eschatology.
Around the same time the author of an extensive commentary on the Pauline epistles and of *Questions on the Old and New Testaments* was active in Rome. His real name is lost and instead he is known in modern scholarship as “Ambrosiaster”. Subscribing by and large to a literal exegesis he interprets the Biblical texts with reference to historical, political and personal issues. For example, he seems to have had detailed knowledge of Judaism in his time and of Roman church and civic politics. His existential reading of the Pauline text led him to understand the passage Romans 5:12 (“…Adam, ‘in whom’ all have sinned”) in terms of a kind of original sin and develop a concept of justification by faith alone, themes which Augustine later developed too in his Pauline exegesis.

Apparently also in the early 380s Pelagius arrived in Rome from Britain. He was to write an influential Pauline commentary too as well as letters and ascetic writings. His works *On nature* and *In defence of free will* were to become foundational for a serious alternative to Augustine’s theology.

Shortly after Pelagius, in 383, Jerome of Stridon arrived in Rome and began a long and in many ways notorious career not so much as a theologian than a polemicist and exegete. Jerome’s oeuvre is too vast to outline it here, but a few significant works can be identified. An early work is the *Debate between a Luciferian and an Orthodox*, in which the faultlines between Nicene and anti-Nicene positions are explored in view of re-baptism, a practice which Jerome argued never existed in the Orthodox tradition. Later, around 415, Jerome was among the first to engage polemically with Pelagianism in his *Dialogue against the Pelagians*. Jerome’s initiative in this regard predates that of Augustine, a fact that is frequently overlooked.

Another important role in Latin theology during Augustine’s time was played by Jerome’s erstwhile friend and later enemy Rufinus of Aquileia, who flourished around 400. His translations of major Greek theological works (following earlier work of a similar kind by Ambrose, as mentioned above) had a deep impact on the theological landscape of the Latin west. He translated Origen’s *First Principles* into Latin alongside works supporting Origen such as the first book of Eusebius’s and Pamphilus’s *Defense of Origen*. He justified his work in an *Apology* and affirmed his own orthodoxy in works such as his *Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed*, including against enemies such as Jerome, who accused him of trying to conceal the heretical nature of Origen’s teaching by sanitising his translations.

An author who should perhaps also be mentioned here, who is only known through Augustine’s own works, is Julian of Ayclanum. He wrote polemics against Augustine, in defence of Pelagius and Caelestius after their condemnation in 418, and in doing so also touched upon various theological topics, for example on the Creed and on specific questions regarding Creation, Christology, and Marriage.

Augustine’s exceptionally close and detailed engagement with Julian’s works cannot hide the fact that in general, as Michael Williams has put it, he “was not a great reader of his Christian contemporaries.” Still, in a wider cultural sense all the literary output both of his time and of the centuries before him is very much mirrored in his work, and this is certainly true in the case of Latin Christian theological and polemical writings.

Notes
See T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A historical and literary study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971); for regular updates on Tertullian scholarship with critical comments see the *Chronica Tertullianea* in the *Revue des études augustiniennes* (from 1976 onwards); for an overview on Tertullian on the web see the excellent website maintained by Roger Pearse, [www.tertullian.org](http://www.tertullian.org).


3 Tertullian, *Apology* 50.13. The motif is frequently used by Augustine in his sermons (for example, *sermones* 22.4.4; 286.4.3; 301.1.1), despite the fact that in Augustine’s time the persecutions had become a distant memory.


10 See P. B. Hinchliff, *Cyprian of Carthage and the Unity of the Christian Church* (London: Chapman, 1974); M. M. Sage, *Cyprian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Cyprian scholarship is regularly updated and critically reviewed since 1986 in the *Chronica Tertullianea et Cyprianea* included in the *Revue des études augustiniennes*.

11 On this and many other questions see M. B. Simmons, *Arnobius of Sicca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).


Traditionally, all anti- or non-Nicene positions after Nicaea have tended to be lumped together as “Arian”. More recently, the term “Homoean” has been preferred, since what characterised these positions most was their attempt (supported by Constantius II.) to agree on a position using a formula different from the contested Nicene “homoousios” (meaning that Father and Son are “equal in substance”); and the formula that was found was “homoios” (meaning that Father and Son are “alike”).


The definite article is deliberate here. What is meant is not faith in the modern sense, but the faith expressed in the Creed.


38 G. Greshake, Gnade als konkrete Freiheit (Mainz: Grünewald, 1972).