

# Augustine of Hippo, The City of God, XI.5; & Theophilus of Antioch, To Autolycus, III.6

Post by “Eikadistes” of November 10, 2023 at 10:06 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

<https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102/npnf102.iv.XI.5.html>

Quote

Next, we must see what reply can be made to those who agree that God is the Creator of the world, but have difficulties about the time of its creation, and what reply, also, they can make to difficulties we might raise about the place of its creation. For, as they demand why the world was created then and no sooner, we may ask why it was created just here where it is, and not elsewhere. For if they imagine infinite spaces of time before the world, during which God could not have been idle, in like manner they may conceive outside the world infinite realms of space, in which, if any one says that the Omnipotent cannot hold His hand from working, will it not follow that they must adopt Epicurus' dream of innumerable worlds? with this difference only, that he asserts that they are formed and destroyed by the fortuitous movements of atoms, while they will hold that they are made by God's hand, if they maintain that, throughout the boundless immensity of space, stretching interminably in every direction round the world, God cannot rest, and that the worlds which they suppose Him to make cannot be destroyed...

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_City\\_of\\_God](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_City_of_God)

It still surprises me that we can talk about (and scholars talk about, and the ancients talk about) the demise of the Epicurean school... and yet [Augustine of Hippo](#) (354-430 CE), writing in the 400s CE, can \*still\* be railing against Epicurus and his philosophy. As [Joshua](#) has pointed out, Augustine wrote that the ashes of Stoicism and Epicureanism are so cold that not a single spark can be struck from them against Christianity (Ep. 118.12). And yet, he feels compelled to include a dig against them in his *City of God*. Was he trying to convince others or himself that the Epicurean "ashes" were so cold?

Earlier, [Theophilus of Antioch](#) (115~183/5 CE) includes slanders against both the Stoics and Epicureans in [his letter To Autolycus \(Ad Autolycum 3.6\)](#):

## Quote

And Epicurus himself, too, as well as teaching atheism, teaches along with it incest with mothers and sisters, and this in transgression of the laws which forbid it; for Solon distinctly legislated regarding this, in order that from a married parent children might lawfully spring, that they might not be born of adultery, so that no one should honour as his father him who was not his father, or dishonour him who was really his father, through ignorance that he was so. And these things the other laws of the Romans and Greeks also prohibit. Why, then, do Epicurus and the Stoics teach incest and sodomy, with which doctrines they have filled libraries, so that from boyhood this lawless intercourse is learned? And why should I further spend time on them, since even of those they call gods they relate similar things?

It seems the early Christians were SO threatened by the Epicureans (and Stoics) that they just railed and railed against them endlessly. From that alone, it appears that Epicurus's school continued to have great significance and impact well into the "Christian" era.

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From everything I've read, I have gotten a few impressions:

(1) We overestimate the amount of people in the Roman Empire who actually identified as "Christian" by 400 CE. Just because the Emperor passed an edict, and just because a State passed a declaration does not necessarily mean that all of those living within the jurisdiction of that system had mentally converted to that tradition. (*The government of China versus the religious practices of the majority of its population serves as a good example.*)

(2) We underestimate the popularity of Neoplatonism during the same time period that Christianity was rising in numbers. This was particularly problematic (much more so than any threat of Epicureanism) because a number of the early Christian Church Fathers (who are still accepted in Christian culture as Saints and guides) were Middle Platonists, (*first*) and Christians (*second*). Neoplatonism was a mystical, providential competitor with Nicene Christianity.

(3) We overlook the influence of the Christian heretics. **Well** into the Middle Ages, Nicene Christians were still fighting the heresies of Arianism and Nestorianism. Many of these heretics were influenced by the notion that some element of Jesus was flesh-and-blood, thus, in the same way that Fascists tend to call everyone remotely left of them Communists (or vis-a-versa), everyone who doesn't agree with Nicene Christians were "Epicureans", or some other slur.

(4) We *also* overlook the influence of Gnosticism throughout the Empire. During this same time period, Mandaeanism and Manichaeism developed and began claiming thousands of converts, particularly among the Persian community which contributed Zoroastrian themes to their

practice. Like the heretics, they believed in some divinity of Jesus of Nazareth and/or John the Baptist, and yet, still, they were not considered "Christian" by the Church Fathers.

(5) Along that same line of Persian influence, we also overlook the influence of the Cult of Mithra. This seems to have been (at least, at the beginning of the Roman Empire) the dominant spiritual tradition of Roman soldiers, and had a particular presence among men who previously practiced mystery rites. This cult was a competitor with Nicene Christianity, heretical Christian sects, Gnostics, Middle Platonists, and Neoplatonists.

So, it may not necessarily have been the case that the spark of Epicureanism was extinguished by the deluge of Christianity, but rather, was both (a) being appropriated as a slur for the opponents of any forms of Idealism, and (b) was competing in a plural world where no one ideology claimed over 50% of the population.