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Friendship in Christianity:

Some perspectives from Jesus to Schleiermacher

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ABSTRACT: Friendship has been a central theme throughout two thousand years of Christianity, though no single, consistent set of Christian ideas or practices regarding friendship has endured across this entire period. This essay examines key examples of Christian friendship within their specific contexts, challenging the common misconception that Christianity significantly downplays the importance of friendship between individuals. The first example is found in the New Testament, where Jesus' disciples are sometimes referred to as his philoi ('friends'). Another passage describes believers' trust in God as akin to the trust of friends in need who rely on the support of their good friends. Nonetheless, the Hellenistic ideal of reciprocal friendship is potentially reshaped in Christianity by Jesus' command to 'love your enemies,' which complicates the traditional notion of mutual friendship. A second example is Bardaiṣan of Edessa, a Syriac Christian around 200 CE, who created a synthesis of Christian and traditional Edessan court ethics regarding friendship. The third example considers the ideas and practices of friendship among Greek and Latin church fathers, alongside their classical pagan influences. While some Christian teachings advised against friendships with pagans, in practice, even prominent theologians of late antiquity maintained close friendships with pagan intellectuals. The fourth example highlights the enduring ideal of a friend willing to sacrifice his life, which is shared across pagan, Jewish, and Christian interpretations of the famous Pythagorean story of Damon and Phintias before the tyrant Dionysius of Sicily. The essay explores variations of this narrative across languages including Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, Italian, English, and German, from the fourth century BCE to the present, focusing particularly on Schiller's ballad 'The Pledge' (1798). Finally, the essay examines the Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher's early 19th-century synthesis of pre-Christian, Christian, and modern transreligious concepts and practices of friendship. This exploration reveals the diversity and adaptability of friendship within Christian thought and demonstrates its lasting significance across different eras and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Antiquity; Middle Ages; Jesus; 'Damon and Phintias'; Schiller.

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Introduction

It would be impossible to summarize two thousand years of "Friendship in Christianity" within a short essay, given the absence of a singular core or fixed set of Christian ideas and practices of friendship throughout this period.[1] However, different perspectives on friendship may be adumbrated within this long and manifold history. Christianity is defined here in a very basic sense as, first, the belief in a loving God who seeks the salvation of all human beings, second, Jesus's announcement of a Kingdom of God that "is not of this world" (Gospel of John 18.36), and third, the emergence of different communities of believers who share rituals and certain assumptions and comprise "the Church." These aspects have shaped ideas and practices of friendship in Christianity over the centuries.

The diversity of Christian perspectives on friendship mirrors the religion's intrinsic plurality over the course of its history. From the very beginning in the first century, Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians had a different cultural background than Greek-speaking Jewish Christians who lived in the *diaspora* within the Roman Empire. Moreover, Jewish Christians were generally used to cultural and religious customs different from those of pagan Christians (i.e. those who had not been Jewish prior to their conversion). Gradually, over the course of centuries, Christianity spread into different religious, social, political, and geographical contexts throughout the world. When Christianity reached Armenia, Mesopotamia, India, and Ethiopia in Antiquity, or when, much later, Jesuit missionaries came to China or to South and Central America in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, local traditions of friendship would sometimes be retained without change, sometimes integrated into a Christian framework, sometimes transformed, sometimes banned. The outcome of these cross-cultural encounters was heavily dependent on social and regional contexts, aims, structures, political conditions, cultural rules, or individual practices. Therefore, this essay will touch upon different major aspects, often difficult to distinguish clearly from one another: ideas about friendship, individual practices of friendship, and friendship as based on social rules.

One of the most prominent clichés about the history of friendship in Christianity claims that friendship was held in highest esteem in the pagan world – "surely there is no other possession that can compare with a good friend" says Xenophon's Socrates (*Memorabilia* 2.4.5) – and that pagan friendship was focused on relationships primarily between male persons, either vertically between patron and clients or horizontally between men of the same social class and education, whereas Christianity focused on the ideal of friendship with God and an orthodox interpretation of faith. Therefore, says the cliché, the relevance of friendship between human beings diminished considerably in Christianity because the idea of love replaced the idea of friendship – love of God and a spiritualized love for one's neighbor (who should also be a pious Christian): Christian *agape* replaced pagan *philia;* Christian *caritas* substituted pagan *amicitia*.

This narrative is anything but accurate. None other than Cicero linked love and friendship by saying, "It is love (*amor*), from which the word 'friendship' (*amicitia*) is

derived, that leads to the establishing of the goodwill" that may cause friendship (*Laelius* §26). The contrast between Pagans and Christians contained in this cliché centers on comparison of passages in some famous literary texts on upper-class friendship in Athens of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE (such as Plato's *First Alcibiades*, *Lysis,* and *Symposium*) with a handful of passages mostly from paraenetic literary Christian texts of Antiquity. In reality, however, the world of classical Athens (which had already been ridiculed by Aristophanes for some of its aspects, such as pederasty) was long gone when Christianity dawned as a new religious movement. Pagan contemporaries of the early Christians up to the sixth century CE, from Seneca to Themistius and Damascius, probably shared more social practices and ethical convictions with their Christian neighbors than with the characters in Plato's earlier dialogues. Even in the first three centuries of the Roman Empire (before Christians became a majority), life was thoroughly different from that in classical Greece half a millennium earlier. What is more, even at the end of the fourth century CE most of the supposedly sharp boundaries between Pagans and Christians did not exist in reality (cf. Cameron 2011).

1. Friendship in the New Testament

The prime example of "friendship in Christianity" concerns Jesus as depicted in the Gospels of the *New Testament* (cf. Fitzgerald 1996; Stegemann 2006). The phrase "Jesus and his disciples" is familiar from these texts. Disciple, Greek *mathētēs*, literally means "learner," from *manthano* "to learn", and occurs 261 times in the New Testament. In most cases, the word denotes the disciples of Jesus. *Philos*, friend, on the other hand, occurs only twenty-eight times. Occasionally, the expression *philoi* (friends) of Jesus refers to the same group as his "learning" disciples. For example, in Luke 12.4 Jesus advises his disciples: "I tell you, my friends (*philoi*), do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more." Some occurrences of the word *philos*, mainly in Luke, Acts, and the Johannine writings, may evoke Hellenistic ideas of friendship, as for example in the parable at Luke 11.5-8, immediately after the Lukan version of the Lord's Prayer: believers trust in God as friends who are in great need trust in their good friends, who will help them even if this causes them difficulties. This follows the usual Hellenistic ideal of personal friendship and interprets God's care for human beings within this context. A similar case is John 15.12-14. Here, shortly before he is arrested, Jesus says, "My command is this: love (*agapate*) each other as I have loved you. Greater love (*agapē*) has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends (*philoi*). You are my friends if you do what I command [namely love each other]." Similarly, in Plato's *Symposium,* Phaedrus says that lovers are willing to die for each other (179b). In both these passages, male friends seem to be in view. In the Gospel of Luke, on the other hand, the women around Jesus are given much more attention.

The sentences quoted from the Gospel of John lay the emphasis on something different from the Gospels of Matthew 22.36-39 and Mark 12.28-31, where Jesus identifies "love the Lord your God" and "love your neighbor as yourself" as the greatest commandments. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus seems to go beyond

these two greatest commandments: "You have heard 'Love your neighbor' [*Leviticus* 19.18] … But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you … If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?" (Matthew 5.45-47). Whether this imperative to love one's enemies was a principally new element in ethics is a debated question. Popular pagan Greek ethics in the late first and early second centuries CE taught that the true Cynic philosopher would love even those who beat him up (Epictetus 3.22.54; Dio Chrysostomus 78.42). Both in Jesus's case and in that of the Cynics, this may have been good advice for wandering preachers, who were despised by many contemporaries.

However, the command "love your enemies" so prominently given in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount was soon displaced from its original context to become a central, utopian ideal for Christians (cf. Kany 2013: 662-667, 689-695). It produces, at least in theory, an ethics very different from that on which Hellenistic ideas of friendship are based in principle. "For the Greeks, friendship was one of the most important social relationships, generally egalitarian and guided by two main norms of behaviour, the duty of reciprocity and a thinking guided by agonal competition … Political actions and the idea of justice were largely based on the desire of helping one's friends and harming one's enemies to the best of one's ability" (Gehrke 2006/2023). Of course, Greek ethics was not quite as simple as that, and a great author such as Sophocles would recognize its deficiencies (Blundell 1989). However, the Christian imperative to love one's enemies is a very different ethical principle (again: in theory, unfortunately not always in practice). This Christian maxim may have given rise to reservations about friendship terminology among early Christians, because loving one's friends is a normal part of life whereas love of enemies is part of a re-evaluation of values that Jesus's Sermon on the Mount seems to present.

Contrasting conceptions of friendship is also a topic at Luke 23.12. Herod and his soldiers ridicule Jesus and send him back to Pilate: "That day Pilate and Herod became friends (*philoi*) – before this they had been enemies." And the Gospel of John 19.12 has the Jews say to Pilate: "If you release this man (Jesus), you are not a friend of the Emperor/Caesar (*philos tou Kaisaros*). Anyone who claims to be a king opposes the Emperor/Caesar." Jesus had indeed announced a kingdom, the *basileia tou theou* (Kingdom of God). In both these passages we get a glimpse into the strongly political connotation of friendship within Greek and Roman culture, both considered theoretically, as in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics,* and in Roman practices of *amicitia* from Republican times to Late Antiquity (Gehrke 2006/2023). Here, an important and generally accepted kind of friendship is based on utility. Political friendship is an instrument for stabilizing peace and for increasing one's power. This kind of friendship became suspect to many early Christian authors because it was considered selfish rather than sincere. When Christians describe their relationships with other Christians and sometimes with all human beings, most prefer family metaphors even to this day: brothers and sisters, not friends. However, when the Roman emperors became Christians in the fourth century they continued traditional practices of friendship, both in domestic politics and in foreign affairs.

2. Bardaiṣan of Edessa, an early Syriac Christian

My second case concerns Bardaiṣan of Edessa, a leading personage of Syriac Christianity in the decades around 200 CE (cf. Drijvers 1966). Edessa, today Şanlıurfa (Urfa) in Turkey, fifty kilometers north of the frontier with Syria, at the time was one of the Syrian metropolises governed by local royal dynasties. As a Christian philosopher and astrologer, Bardaiṣan spent most of his life within a circle of friends, pupils, and followers at the court of King Abgar VIII of Edessa. The Christian scholar Julius Africanus met him when he visited Edessa in 195 CE as part of a delegation from the Emperor, Septimius Severus. He relates that Bardaiṣan was an excellent archer and even drew a precise pointillist portrait of a soldier, not with brush and paint, but by shooting many arrows onto a shield (Julius Africanus *Kestoi*, fr. 12.20 Wallraff). Such talents were suitable to impress a society of aristocratic companions who passed their time in sports, arts, and intellectual debates. Africanus was also impressed by a scientific experiment carried out by Bardaiṣan and his friends to measure the average speed of an arrow with great precision.

The Syriac "Book of the Laws of the Countries," depicts Bardaiṣan in an almost ritualized social event, a debate with his upper-class friends on fate, astrology, and freedom. Bardaiṣan limits the influence of astrological constellations to physical circumstances, whereas he sees ethical decisions as based on free will. In the dialogue, his opponent ʿAwīḏā admits that perhaps one may avoid evil, but asks what man is able to do that which is right. Bardaiṣan replies: "It is much easier to do what is right than to avoid what is wrong. For good is natural to man, so that he is glad when he acts rightly. Evil, on the contrary, is the work of the enemy [i.e. the devil], and therefore man does those evil things when he is not master of himself … It is easy for a man to praise and laud his friend.[2] But it is not easy for him to refrain from abusing and cursing him whom he hates, yet it is possible" (Bardaiṣan 1965: 18-21). Therefore, Bardaiṣan recommends "true love, whose peace lasts till the end of days" (*ibid*. 21). This seems to be a moderate, milder version of Jesus's commandment to "love your enemies" for a social context that was completely different from the one in which Jesus lived. Bardaiṣan's new command may be a compromise between traditional Edessan court ethics, with its rhetoric of praising one's political and personal friends on the one hand, and Jesus Christ's counterintuitive ethics of love of enemies on the other. Bardaiṣan seems to be content if his fellows at court manage to reduce emotions of hate in themselves. He does not expect all of his fellows to become saints.

3. Some glimpses into Greek and Latin Christian sources on friendship

Before some examples of Christian theory and practice of friendship in the fourth and fifth centuries,[3] I would like to address the question of quantity. We have a number of well-known pagan texts on friendship, especially Plato's *Lysis*, books 8 and 9 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 2 of Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, several essays by Plutarch, and in Latin Cicero's *Laelius de amicitia*. This may not seem like very much, but at first glance

there is even less within Christian literature. There are many passages on friendship in ancient Christian texts but no dedicated book on the subject. Church historians identify the twelfth-century *Liber de spirituali amicitia* ("Book on spiritual friendship") by the Cistercian abbot Aelred of Rievaulx in North Yorkshire as the first Christian book exclusively about friendship. This author rewrote Cicero's *Laelius* for a Christian context, and not only for monastic use. Aelred's work is highly original, with deep insights into the psychological and spiritual emotions and problems that occur when human beings live in friendship and in a life directed towards Jesus Christ. For Aelred, friendship is a central element of Christian life and spirituality (Köpf 2006). However, this was a unique, solitary book for educated, spiritually interested Christians; there was no contemporary extensive discourse on the subject.

Does this mean that Christians were much less interested in friendship compared with pagans? I suspect not. The most comprehensive digital collection of works written in Latin, the Brepols *Library of Latin Texts* contains 1272 references to *amicitia* in pagan ancient literature (200 BCE-200CE), 1080 references in the patristic period (200-735 CE) and 3018 for the period 735-1500 CE. Pagans and Christians were interested in friendship. Perhaps Christians did not write theoretical books on friendship before the twelfth century because they found the Greek and Latin classics mentioned above still useful and concentrated on transforming the theories found in the classics for a Christian context. This is what many passages in patristic and Medieval texts do. And this is no surprise since, for Christian authors, the classical texts on friendship give partially acceptable answers to common questions regarding friendship: Is friendship based on love better than friendship based on utility? Is friendship possible between men of different social or moral levels? Is there only one type of friendship? How much dissent and disagreement should one accept within a friendship? What are the issues that could prevent a friendship from continuing? Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero believe that only a truly good person, a man of great virtue, can be an ideal friend, but they do acknowledge that normally one has to deal with friends who are not perfect. Cicero's thought contains the Stoic aspect that the good person is a wise person. For Cicero, ideal friendship "is nothing else than agreement on all things, divine and human, along with good will and affection" (*Laelius* 6.20).

Basil and Gregory Nazianzen, two of the most important Greek bishops and theologians of the fourth century, were close friends for almost their entire lives. It was not just a private friendship; as bishops, they cooperated in difficult matters of church politics. When Basil died, Gregory wrote a touching obituary in which he coined the epithet "the Great" which is still used of him today (*Oratio* 43.1). For Augustine, the greatest of the Latin Church Fathers, friends were central from childhood to his last years. In the *Confessions* (4.4.7-7.12), Augustine describes his deep mourning after the death of a much-loved friend at length; he quotes Horace (*Carmen* 1.3,8), according to whom a friend is "half of one's soul," with approval. A long digression in praise of friendship follows. Augustine's first Christian writings are dialogues in the Ciceronian manner that recall the intellectual debates he had with his friends.

Occasionally, friendships broke apart, among Christians as well as non-Christians (Fürst 1996). Basil had been a friend of Bishop Eustathius of Sebaste, but he withdrew from him when he got the impression that Eustathius had hidden his real theological thoughts from him during a major theological controversy within the Roman Empire and had secretly acted against him. The Christian intellectuals Jerome and Rufinus had been close friends, but their friendship ended in furious disagreement.

Most of the Roman emperors from Constantine onward were Christians, and in this new political climate Christian bishops played a far more public role than they had in the first centuries. Now, in the fourth century, they often pursued traditional Roman "pagan" forms of friendship in the sense of a social relationship between members of an educated elite. Their networking facilitated the exchange of information, opinions, and books; the promotion of one's own new works in another region of the Roman Empire; influence on politics as well as Church politics, and more. In many respects, this was not much different from Cicero's correspondence with friends or from that of the fourth-century pagan rhetor, Libanius. Christian authors, it is true, sometimes emphasize that friends are brothers in Jesus Christ, that they should share the same orthodox faith, that true friends disclose their personal emotions, and so on (Konstan 1996). From the fourth to the sixth century, the old Roman conceptions of *amicitia* between aristocrats, as well as between patrons and their clients, were still valid among both Pagans and Christians. Sometimes Christian theologians even interpreted the relationship between God and human beings in terms of friendship between a patron and his clients (Brown 1992; Rebenich 2008).

Christians found many old, non-Christian examples still valid through good and bad times in personal friendships. When the old Gallic aristocrat Ausonius, more a pagan than a Christian, complained in a Latin poem that his young friend Paulinus, who had decisively converted to Christianity, had made himself scarce and let the friendship slide, he teased Paulinus by reminding him of famous pairs of friends, writing that heartless Paulinus acted as if "Pylades had left Orestes, and Sicilian Damon had not kept his bond!" (*Epistula* 27: 34-43). Paulinus rejected the tease in a poem from 394 CE in which he declares that his friendship and love for Ausonius are deep in his heart forever. Paulinus points out that, for him as a Christian believer, friendship means more than it ever meant for traditional Pagans: "When I am freed from the prison of my body and fly forth from the earth, in whatever heavenly region our common Father sets me, even there I shall have you in mind" (*Carmen* 11, 57-60). True friendship between two persons will continue beyond death, in eternal life. Ausonius's complaint is often cited as proof for the hypothesis that people who converted to Christianity in Antiquity tended to break off their friendships with pagans; this is a misunderstanding.

One should not confuse normative texts (whether they are paranetic or polemical) of Pagans or Christians with how Pagans or Christians lived in reality, nor even with how average people thought about the topic of friendship. The early Christian apocalyptic text *The Shepherd of Hermas,* for example, claims that Christians "living with the Gentiles, and being corrupted by the vain opinions of the Gentiles, departed from God, and worked the

works of the Gentiles. These therefore were numbered with the Gentiles" (Parable 8.9). The passage is quoted as proof that early Christians separated from Pagans in daily life. In fact, the sentences quoted suggest that many or perhaps even most Christians in Rome *did* live with pagan (and Jewish) people. Otherwise, this would not have been problematized by the *Shepherd's* unknown author, who seems to have lived in Rome in the first half of the second century. There is no reason to believe that many of his readers or hearers followed his unrealistic implicit advice.

Even in the fourth century, when Christians became the majority in the Roman Empire, Basil maintained a friendly correspondence with his pagan teacher of rhetoric, Libanius. The Christian intellectual Synesius of Cyrene wrote letters of deep affection to Hypatia, the famous, probably pagan mathematician and philosopher who was murdered in 415 within a political conflict between the Christian prefect of the city of Alexandria and violent supporters of the Christian bishop of Alexandria (Socrates h.e. 7.13-15). One should not make things less ambiguous than they were. No doubt, Christianity caused change and innovations, but the evaluation of which contemporary habits Christians need to contradict, which to accept, and which to transform has been a continuous process throughout the history of Christianity.

For the Western tradition Augustine's thoughts on friendship became central (Hadot 1986; Lienhard 2009). Before his conversion to Christianity in 386, Augustine was a professional teacher of rhetoric. Cicero, of course, was the leading Latin authority in this field, and Augustine had studied his works intensively. Already in his first Christian publication (Contra academicos 3.6.13), Augustine quotes Cicero's definition of friendship as cited here before. He calls the definition right and pious. What fascinates Augustine particularly is Cicero's emphasis on the *consentio*, the agreement or accord, that produces a bond between two persons. Friendship is a kind of happy tripartite structure: the lover, the loved, and love as the bond between the friends. It seems that later, as a bishop in North Africa, Augustine felt that Cicero's definition needed a Christian interpretation. In a letter to his old friend Marcianus, who was not yet baptized, he writes: "'For now we have an agreement on things human and divine along with good will and love' (Cicero) in Christ Jesus, our Lord, our truest peace. He summed up all the divine teachings in two commandments when he said: 'Love the Lord your God … and love your neighbor as yourself' … In the first, there is agreement on things divine along with good will and love; in the second, there is such agreement on things human. If you hold on to these two most firmly along with me, our friendship will be true and everlasting, and it will unite us not only to each other but also to the Lord" (Epistula 258.1; ET Roland Teske). Of course, this is an exhortation to his old friend to get baptized. But there are similar passages on friendship in *Confessions* 4.4-12 and other works by Augustine. A superficial reading might seem to suggest that a Christian should only have Christian friends. However, I think Augustine's point is more subtle. It is part of Augustine's theology to search for concordances between the best of pagan philosophy and biblical inspirations. For him, even a purely rational discovery of something true is ultimately a discovery of Christ as the Logos, the truth itself. And true love for him is poured into the heart by the Holy Spirit.

For Augustine, God is ultimately the only being that should be loved *per se*, whereas human friends should be loved with respect to God as their creator. However, it would be an enormous trivialization to believe that Augustine expected Christians to have Christian friends only. Daily practice in real life is something very different from Augustine's mystic view behind all realities. In practice, Bishop Augustine exchanged letters with the aristocrat Volusianus, who sympathized more with pagan than Christian conventions, and, what is more, in one of his late writings Augustine calls Volusianus "a great man" and adds: "I mention him with honor and love" (*Enchiridion* 10.34).

4. A multilingual and cross-religious story of friendship and fidelity

Certain notions of ideal friendship may be found in popular literature across different religions and cultures. I am not suggesting that a field of human ideals exists that is completely identical in all civilizations and religions from Antiquity to modern times. However, our current fascination with diversity and plurality may sometimes underestimate the fact that different societies in different places and times within human history can share some fundamental or even universal needs, hopes, and ideals. To have friends whom one can trust and on whom one can rely even if one is in serious trouble is an ideal which most persons will share, even with considerably different background social codes and rules.

In 1798, Friedrich Schiller wrote one of the most famous German poems on friendship, "Die Bürgschaft" ("The Pledge"): A man named Damon (Moeros, in an earlier version of the text) wants to kill Dionysius, the tyrant of Sicily, but is captured and brought before the tyrant. Damon admits his guilt and is sentenced to death but asks for a postponement of three days in order to arrange his sister's wedding. A friend of Damon's does not hesitate to go to the tyrant as surety for Damon's return. Dionysius accepts this pledge. Damon leaves the town and arranges his family affairs. A considerable number of unforeseen disasters make his return journey take longer than expected. Everything is ready for the crucifixion of Damon's friend. At the very last moment, Damon arrives and shouts "Me, hangman! Kill me; I am the one for whom he is dying." Amazement seizes the people all around, tears of sorrow and joy wet their faces, and even the tyrant Dionysius is deeply impressed, pardons Damon as well as his friend, and asks the two friends to take him into their bond of friendship as the third in their union (ET: Schiller 2000).

Schiller's ballad is a document of the period between 1750 and 1850, which had probably the most vivid predilection for friendship of any period in German-speaking countries. This poem on the highest degree of magnanimity has remained popular in German schools to this day, although it may be but a step from Schiller's sublime ideal to the ridiculous. Bertolt Brecht wrote a parody on the poem in 1936/38, since "in the end the tyrant was not a tyrant" but a friend (Brecht 1988), a twist unthinkable within Brecht's political perspective at that period.

In an English translation of "The Pledge," the editors Marianna Wertz and Paul Gallagher write, "Schiller draws on the Christian teaching that there is no greater love than

to lay down one's life for a friend, to transform Dionysius from a tyrant into a friend of liberty" (in: Schiller 2000, 85). I quoted those words of Jesus from the Gospel of John above. Is the tyrant's turn a Christian example of loving one's enemy? There is a Christian element in Schiller's moral poems, no doubt. However, the correspondence between Schiller and Goethe in 1797 and 1798 clearly shows that Schiller borrowed the plot of the "Pledge" from a pagan *Fabula* by Hyginus (no. 257), a Latin author of the Augustan age or later.[4] Within his collection of mythological, historical, and other material, possibly for educational purposes, Hyginus tells the story of Moerus and his friend as an example of friends who remain loyal to each other even if it puts their own lives in jeopardy in times of tyranny. Almost no detail of Hyginus's narrative is missing in Schiller's poem, including the planned crucifixion and the tyrant Dionysius's wish to become their friend in the end – neither Hyginus nor Schiller mention the response of the two friends; readers will normally assume that they fulfill the tyrant's wish.

Schiller's additions to Hyginus primarily comprise his longer series of disasters that prevent Damon's quick return – a ballad requires some sort of suspense. Schiller seems to be illustrating what he calls "das Erhabene der Handlung" ("the sublimity of the act") in one of his philosophical studies. This occurs when a human subject of self-determined freedom deliberately chooses to suffer in order to do what he considers to be his duty (Schiller 1992 b, 440). The tyrant is central to the poem as well, and Schiller combines Christian and ancient pagan humanist elements with a contemporary, republican idea of transforming monarchy into a modern society based on moral equality through the power of friendship.

Hyginus was not the originator of the plot. We can trace the story back to the fourth century BCE, when it was told by the Peripatetic philosopher Aristoxenus of Tarentum in his work on the Pythagorean way of life. The Pythagorean background, not mentioned by Hyginus or Schiller, provides the story's original context. Based on Aristoxenus, in *De Vita Pythagorica* (229-233) Iamblichus reports that the Pythagorean brotherhood of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE held friendship in very high estimation in a personal, religious, political, and cosmic sense: friendship between the gods and human beings, friendship of the soul with the body, friendship between human and non-human beings, friendship between all citizens of a state, friendship between men, or between men and women, between sisters and brothers, friendship within oneself, and close friendship among members of the Pythagorean brotherhood. The Pythagoreans tended to keep personal friendships within their group and, in a certain contradiction of their idea of universal friendship, avoided friendships with people outside their brotherhood. In the version of the pledge tale by Aristoxenus (Fragment 31 Wehrli), the protagonists are a Pythagorean would-be assassin called Phintias, his Pythagorean friend Damon,[5] and the tyrant Dionysius of Sicily.[6] Most of the story runs similarly to the one told by Hyginus. The climax of the tale in Aristoxenus is its ending, which is omitted by Hyginus and Schiller: Phintias and Damon reject the tyrant's persistent request to include him in their friendship. The point is obvious: the Pythagorean way of life is a good option for having true friends, even under conditions of persecution and tyranny.

Polyaenus, a second-century CE writer on war stratagems, relates that Dionysius invited Italian towns *peri philias*, "because of friendship," that is, to become political friends. According to Polyaenus, a Pythagorean teacher called Euephenus advises his disciples not to trust Dionysius. The tyrant is annoyed and sentences the Pythagorean to death. Euephenus asks for a postponement of half a year in order to arrange his sister's wedding, and a friend of his acts as surety. In the end, Dionysius seeks the friendship of the two friends, but it is left open whether they accept his request; in any case they acknowledge his good will. The tyrant's liberal decision, concludes Polyaenus, motivated many Italians to change their minds and trust Dionysius (Polyaenus, Strategemata 5.2.22). Obviously, this is a strategic story of half-personal, half-political friendship suited to Roman imperialism.

Cicero (106-43 BCE) does not mention the pledge story in his dialogue *Laelius on Friendship* summarized above but does refer to it in other works. In the *Tusculan Disputations,* Cicero discusses the Stoic theory that virtue is sufficient for a happy life. Dionysius of Syracuse considered himself happy – but was that true? "While, however, he had a lively fear of the disloyalty of friends, how deeply he felt the need of them he disclosed in the affair of the two Pythagoreans […]: 'Would,' said he, 'that I could be enrolled as a third in your friendship!' How wretched it was for him to cut himself off from the intimacy of friendship, from the enjoyment of social life, from any freedom of intercourse at all! […] He regarded no man who either felt worthy of freedom or had any wish at all to be free as a friend." (*ibid*. 5.22.63). In his work on duties (*De officiis*), Cicero analyses a paradox of friendship: "supposing that we were bound to do everything that our friends desired, such relations would have to be accounted not friendships but conspiracies." Even for a friend, we should only do what we can do in a manner consistent with our honor. Cicero sets the pledge story into the context of the tension between the *utile* (the useful or expedient) and the *honestum* (what is morally right). Cicero's advice is that when we are "weighing what seems to be expedient in friendship against what is morally right, let apparent expediency be disregarded and moral rectitude prevail; […] In this way we shall arrive at a proper choice between conflicting duties." (*De officiis* 3.10.45 f., and similarly *De finibus* 24.78 f.).

Much less philosophical is the version of the story in the popular Latin collection *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, compiled by the pagan author Valerius Maximus in the first half of the first century CE. In a passage on Greek examples of friendship, Valerius gives more or less an account of Aristoxenus's version of the pledge story (including the Pythagorean background but without telling how the friends reacted to the tyrant's wish for friendship with them) and draws a conclusion that encompasses all three persons: "Has friendship such power? It could implant contempt of death, quench the sweetness of life, make cruelty merciful, convert hatred to love, balance punishment with benefaction" (*Facta et dicta memorabilia* 4.7. ext. 1). Schiller comes close to such an apotheosis of friendship with woolly political implications.

Many Latin Christian authors of Antiquity and the Middle Ages knew the pledge story, mainly thanks to Cicero and Valerius Maximus. The ideal of true friendship that

characterizes Damon and Phintias remained undiminished and praiseworthy but was integrated into the ethical values system of Christianity. Lactantius (*Divinae institutiones* 5.17.22-24) speaks against the Sceptic Carneades who, according to Cicero's *De re publica*, had defended injustice simply "because he realized it could be refuted" in a shocking speech at Rome. For Carneades, "there is no natural law. All human beings … go for what is useful for them … Accordingly, either there is no justice, or, if there is any, it is the height of folly" (Lactantius, *ibid*. 5.16.2 f. = fragment 11b[1] Mette). The logical conclusion is that Carneades claims: "It is folly to spare the life of another to the detriment of one's own." Lactantius retorts, retelling the pledge story: "So you'll think it foolish to die even for friendship's sake? If so, why praise those members of the Pythagorean sect, one of whom surrendered himself to the tyrant as earnest for the other?" (*ibid*. 5.17.22). Lactantius adds that in the end the two friends survived, since the Sicilian tyrant had reformed his own nature and considered them good and wise men, not fools. Lactantius's argumentation is not sufficient to refute Carneades, but it refers to the pagan ideal of faithful friendship in order to show that acting honorably and beyond egoistic limitation to expediency is a valid basis for human ethics that can be shared by wise Pagans and Christians alike.

New aspects are introduced by Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. Ambrose draws on Cicero's analysis of the pledge story in his interpretation and Christian reformulation of the latter's *De officiis*. Ambrose agrees with Cicero that one should never promise something dishonorable, and if one has made such a promise, it is far better not to fulfill it. For this purpose, Ambrose compares the biblical story of Jephtha's vow (*Judges* 11) with the Pythagorean pledge story (Ambrose, *De officiis* 3.12.76-81). We can observe for the first time in Lactantius and Ambrose the western Christian tendency to continue to praise true friendship in the pagan tradition over the course of the centuries while at the same time strengthening Cicero's insistence on the *honestum* as the final criterion for practicing friendship in an ethically good way. Now, in a Christian context, this *honestum* is interpreted as God's will.

In his tractate "On virgins" (2.4.22-2.5.35), written in 377, Ambrose tells the story of a beautiful Christian virgin at Antioch who refuses to sacrifice to the pagan gods during a persecution under a pagan emperor. The virgin is condemned to prostitution but escapes from prison with the help of a Christian soldier who changes clothes with her. Ambrose uses the terminology of pledge and surety (*vadimonium*, *vas*, *praes*): the soldier tries to act as a kind of surety if the virgin does not show up for the execution; the virgin considers the soldier a guarantee that she will keep her virginity (*ibid*. 2.4.32 f.). When she notices that he is about to be executed instead of her, she returns. The virgin and the soldier contend for the prize of martyrdom. Both win the prize and die. This, Ambrose claims, is an even more praiseworthy story than the one about the Pythagorean Damon and his friend (summarized by Ambrose from Cicero's *De officiis* 3.45), because the virgin is a woman and not a man, because the two Pythagoreans were friends whereas the virgin and the soldier did not know each other before, and because the two pagan friends act merely for the sake of their human friendship whereas the virgin and the soldier act for the will of God. There is no inner-worldly happy ending in Ambrose's story of the virgin

of Antioch. True beatitude and reward lie in eternal life after death. Ambrose introduces a double universalization into the concept of friendship: first, true friendship in the sense of deep solidarity is also a matter for women in Christianity, not only for men. Second, Christian friendship can be given to all people who are in need, for such solidarity is God's will. Ambrose thus transforms the old ideal of friendship into a new ideal of universal philanthropy, which should no longer be practiced solely by rulers and intellectuals, but by all people – all Christians, at least. This chapter of Ambrose's work on virgins passed word for word, under the heading "A Virgin of Antioch," into the thirteenth-century Latin *Golden Legend* (no. 60) of Jacobus de Voragine, the most famous collection of hagiographies in the western medieval world, preserved in hundreds of manuscripts and countless printed editions in many languages.

Meanwhile, it was the simple version of the pledge story by Valerius Maximus in particular that found its way into many medieval books of moral *exempla*. One of them is the Latin allegory of the game of chess by Jacobus de Cessolis from around 1300.[7] The book was translated and reworked into several vernacular languages before 1500, and the version printed by William Caxton in 1474, which includes the pledge story (Caxton 1474, fol. 18[v]), was one of the first books printed in English. Jacobus de Cessolis had not even changed the moral interpretation which Valerius Maximus had given the story but quoted it literally because in its new context it sounds Christian: Friendship "could implant contempt of death, quench the sweetness of life, make cruelty merciful, convert hate to love, balance punishment with benefaction" (ET Valerius Maximus 2000, *Facta et dicta memorabilia* 4.7. ext. 1).

Around 1300 in Italy, a famous anonymous Christian collection of vernacular examples of virtues and vices called *Fior di virtù* ("Flowers of virtue") included the full story of Phintias and Damon as an *exemplum* of true friendship, taken almost unchanged from Valerius Maximus, who is mentioned explicitly.[8] Only the framing of the *Fior di virtù* – biblical and patristic quotes and stories in the section before the Damon and Phintias story; from Aristotle and the Bible in the section after it – gives the story a moderately Christian context. This enormously successful work exists in different variants and manuscripts, with more than sixty different printed editions up to 1500, and was translated into many languages.

The most interesting and charming of these versions is its translation into Hebrew in 1600 (*Zemaḥ Zaddiq,* "Flower of the virtuous") by the Venetian Rabbi Leon Modena, who did great work building bridges between Jews and Christians. In his autobiography, he claims that he replaced every reference from the New Testament and from Christian saints in the *Fior di virtù* with sayings from the Talmud (Modena 1989: 124). His actual approach is more differentiated and subtle, as Joanna Weinberg (2003) has brilliantly shown. In his Hebrew version of the story of Damon and Phintias, Leon of Modena changed almost no detail of the *Fior*'s version from Valerius Maximus (Modena 1600, 7[r]) but rearranged the context. He retained most of a chapter of the *Fior* that included quotations from Aristotle and Seneca, but he replaced a quotation from Cicero's *On the Nature of Gods* with a Rabbinic saying and added an aspect missing from the *Fior* by citing

the warning of Rav Pappa (fifth generation of Amoraim) that when a person's finances are prospering there will always be many brothers and friends, but when the person suffers a time of poverty they will abandon him.[9] Modena also supplemented the *Fior* with a nod to the outstanding biblical example of friends loving each other: David and Jonathan.

In 1779, David Friedländer, a pioneer of Jewish assimilation in Germany and forerunner of reformed Judaism, published a German version of the Valerius Maximus story in his reading book for Jewish children, the first of its kind in German (Friedländer 40 f.).[10] Theoretically, Friedländer, who knew Rabbinic sources well, might have known Modena's *Zemaḥ Zaddiq*. However, in the case of the pledge story I am sure that he copied it word for word, with the same heading and a few cuts (omitting the Pythagorean context, for example), from the very first reading book for children and schools in German, put together for the gymnasium by the Swiss Christian theologian and Berlin philosopher Johann Georg Sulzer in 1768. As far as I know, previous research on the pledge story has ignored that the story is included in Sulzer's reading book under the heading "Friendship," within a long section containing examples of virtues and vices, good and bad attitudes (Sulzer 141 f.).

There exists a Hebrew version of the pledge story that is completely independent from the *Fior di virtù*. The linguist, poet, and kabbalist Menahem ben Judah de Lonzano published it in his principal work *Shetei Yadot* ("Two Hands") in 1618 (Lonzano 1618, 50r-50v)[11] and claimed he had discovered it at the end of his copy of the *Midrash Kohelet Rabbah*. The Pythagorean background and the name Dionysius are not mentioned in this version, and the beginning of the story is different. It is a tale about two friends, one of whom is a merchant, and a king, who sentences the merchant to death. In the end, all three become friends. Allusions to the Joseph narrative of the Hebrew Bible give it a somewhat biblical or Levantine touch. At least five German translations of Lonzano's version of the pledge story exist, all produced by important Jewish scholars between 1845 and 1920.[12] During that period, Jews were fighting for emancipation and assimilation into German society. Christian and Jewish Germans used to praise Schiller as a great teacher of civic ethics. Jewish intellectuals were fascinated to discover that the plot of Schiller's friendship story had a prehistory that included not exclusively pagan and Christian texts but had also already been familiar in Hebrew to some Jews in the early seventeenth century. Thus, an early modern common ground of Jewish and Christian ethics had come to light.

There are two versions of the pledge story in Arabic as well. In the first of these, known since the early tenth century CE, the man granted the delay to arrange his family affairs is in the end asked by the ruler and judge at Hira why he returned to the place of execution, and his answer is: because I am a Christian. The ruler is so impressed that he seeks to become a Christian as well. In the other, known since the seventeenth century CE, the ruler and judge at court is Khalif Omar, and none other than Abu Dharr Al-Ghifari (one of the Prophet Muḥammad's first converts) is the guarantor. This version ends with a praise of benevolence and humanity at the present time, which means at the beginning

of Islam. Both versions found their way into nineteenth-century editions of *The Thousand and One Nights,* although they are not contained in the (very varying) earliest manuscripts that bear this famous title.[13] The Arabic versions are less relevant for Amity Studies because they all differ from the Greek, Latin, and Hebrew versions in a crucial respect: the person who is to suffer the death penalty and the person who acts as surety for him are not friends in the Arabic versions; they had never met before the trial takes place, and the accused man chooses the guarantor spontaneously from among the people watching the trial. Therefore, in all Arabic versions known to me, the story touches upon aspects of fidelity, loyalty, and religion rather than friendship.

The Western history of versions of the pledge story continues up to the last and the present century. William Faulkner, for example, parodied it in his short story *Damon and Pythias Unlimited,* where the narrator is confronted with a sneaky swindler and his accomplice: For him, there exists no sincere friendship in a modern city of capitalist brutality (Faulkner 1925/1958). The ancient story was retold in a kind of fantasy antiquity in the animated television series *Mythic Warriors* (Season 2, no.7 of November 6, 1999: Damon and Pythias).[14] In 2002 the old story found its way into the *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History*, in which the author states: "Through the ages Damon and Pythias have been venerated as symbols of the enduring power of loving male friendship, often with strong homoerotic overtones. [...] In the Victorian era, the pagan legend of same-sex love became christianised with reference to the New Testament passage from John 11:53 [...]" (Wentink 139, actually John 15:13, see above part 1). The author neither gives an example of homoerotic overtones nor of relevant literature from the Victorian era and, disappointingly, he is not aware of the fact that the Christianization of the legend had already begun with Lactantius, more than a millennium and a half before the Victorian era.

In this section, I have attempted to show that more or less the same narrative was used to exemplify the good practice of friendship in a variety of places and times. The plot was given different interpretations due to different religious, political, juridical, geographical, chronological, and social contexts. I hope to have demonstrated that, at least in this case, the different religions did not function as separate identities but were in a process of mutual exchange, transformation, critique, use – and that they shared a fascination with true friendship.

5. Friendship in Friedrich Schleiermacher

Finally, I return to the world of Germany around 1800 with a very brief look at a thinker who has been rightly called "a virtuoso of friendship" (Redeker 300). Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was the most influential Protestant theologian of the nineteenth century, a translator of Plato, inspirer of the new concept of a university that revolutionized science and humanities, and friend to Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and secular men and women of the period of Romanticism. Already as a student of theology at Halle in 1788, he wrote a manuscript that develops his own concept of friendship

starting out from books 8 and 9 (on friendship) of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Schleiermacher 1984). He touches upon social theory, sociability (Geselligkeit), communication, ethics. Bernd Oberdorfer (1996) explains that the trajectory of the young Schleiermacher's thought until 1799 is focused on an understanding of "real intersubjectivity in the tension between intimacy ("Intimität") and the public ("Öffentlichkeit")". In Schleiermacher we find a kind of synthesis of much of what the Greek and Roman, Hebrew and Christian traditions of friendship had introduced to mankind. And at the same time, Schleiermacher practiced friendship in a unique way. One of his best friends was Henriette Herz, the brilliant, Jewish-born leader of the best Berlin literary "salon," which was frequented by great intellectuals like Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, Rahel Varnhagen, and Schleiermacher. Henriette Hertz portrays Schleiermacher and his great gift for friendship in her memoirs. Around 1800, she met him almost daily and when they could not see each other, they exchanged letters. She speaks of his "urge to communicate with friends, indeed to open himself up to all the smallest folds of his mind and heart." She quotes from a letter in which he writes to her: "Do good to me and write to me diligently. This must sustain my life ... I even doubt whether I am an individual. I stretch out all my roots and leaves for love; I must touch them directly." (Herz 2013: 81). Henriette Herz explains that one should take this passage with a pinch of salt, since he was a man of subtle humor. It seems to me that the Christian theologian Schleiermacher was on the trail of the mystery of love, friendship, and intersubjectivity – in theory and in practice.

About the author

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Endnotes

1 An interesting survey of aspects of two thousand years of Christian friendship is given by Carmichael 2004.

2 The word for "friend" here is raḥmah, the root rḥm in Syriac meaning "love" rather than "merciful, beneficent" as in Arabic.

[3] Much secondary literature exists on practices and theories of friendship in ancient Christianity (e.g. White 1992, Konstan 1996). I think all attempts at drawing clear lines of development are in danger of simplifying the quantity and diversity of primary sources. To give an example, 140 out of 359 letters by Basil of Caesarea contain passages on friendship, according to Treu 1961. Thousands of ancient Christian letters have ~~also~~ been preserved.

[4] Schiller 1990 (*Briefwechsel mit Goethe*), 15 December 1797; 16 December 1797; 28 August through 4 September 1798.

[5] Schiller erroneously changed the name Moerus (which is only mentioned by Hyginus) to Damon in the final (1804) version of his ballad (Schiller 1992 a, 858), obviously not from the Greek sources but from Cicero, *De officiis* 3.10 or Valerius Maximus 4.7 ext. 1. In both Latin texts the reader cannot tell which friend has which name. – For Schiller's rhyme scheme, the name Phintias would have been a certain challenge anyway.

[6] Aristoxenus seems to be talking about Dionysius II of Syracuse (c. 396/397-after 337 BC), but in other traditions of this legend, Dionysius I the Elder of Syracuse (c. 432-367 BC) sometimes seems to be meant.

[7] Jacobus de Cessolis 1479, fol. 7[ra]; the story is abridged, and *Damon et Phintias* have been distorted into *amon et phycias*.

[8] *Fior di virtu historiale* 1491, fol. b[1][v], ET by N. Fersin, 18 f. The Pythagorean context, however, is omitted. The story is shorter in the edition by Volpi 2018, 163 f. (no. 72 f.).

[9] *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate *Shabbat* 32a.

[10] I would like to thank Philipp Lenhard for pointing me to this interesting publication.

[11] The pledge story is included in the second part of the first section of *Shetei Yadot*. This part (*Maʿarikh*) was printed again by Jellinek 1853, the pledge story here 128 f., and this story was separately reprinted by Jellinek 1857, 143 f.

[12] Steinschneider 1845; Wiener 1854, 334-336; Tendlau 1856; Wünsche 1909, 166-168; bin Gorion 1920, 20-22.

[13] The Christian Arabic version was first introduced into an Arabic edition of *The Thousand and One Nights* by Habicht 1838: 226-229 (ET Burton 1886, 179-181); the Islamic version was first included in the Calcutta 1839 Arabic edition: *Alif Laila* 1839, 408-412 (ET Burton 1885, 99-104). - I will say more on the Arabic versions in a longer study on the pledge stories (in preparation).

[14] See the overview in the Wikipedia article "Mythic Warriors," August 15, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mythic_Warriors

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