

AUGUSTINE
Nick Campion
Notes

Aurelianus Augustinus 354-430 CE, St. Augustine of Hippo.

In his two great works, *Confessions* (c.397) and *City of God* (410), St. Augustine established himself as the foremost theologian of the Catholic church. His argument that the newly christianised Roman state was the representative of the Kingdom of God on earth gave the church a firmly conservative identity as the ally rather than opponent of the political order which was to be the basis of church-state relations through to the early modern period - at least up to the upheavals of the Reformation. The son of a pagan father and Catholic mother, Augustine had a good classical education though, perhaps unique amongst classical philosophers, he failed to learn Greek which he disliked intensely, to any more than a rudimentary level. He is remarkably frank about his utter dislike of Greek literature. At the age of nineteen he joined the Manicheans, a Christian church which had adopted the Zoroastrian Persian cosmology in which the structure and history of the universe was based on the perpetual struggle between light (good) and darkness (evil). To the Manicheans Christ, rather than the Persian deity Ahura Mazda, was the representative of light. During this period Augustine achieved recognition for his philosophical work and was appointed professor rhetoric at Milan. At the age of twenty-eight he converted to Catholicism and at the same time began reading Plato and the neo-Platonic philosophers, Plotinus and Porphyry. Although he personally challenged such elements of neo-Platonic cosmology as the divinity of the stars, the stamp of his authority established a favourable attitude to Platonic cosmology within medieval Christian culture. He was baptized in 387 and in 391 he was ordained a priest in Hippo, near Carthage in what is now Tunisia. He was appointed bishop of Hippo on 395 and spent the rest of his life there. The *City of God* was written in response to the widespread shock aroused by the Visigothic sack of Rome in 410 and Augustine died twenty years later, during the Vandal siege of Carthage.

Augustine's contribution to the history of astronomy is based in his definitive denunciation of astrology, the result of which was to confirm the separation of astrology from astronomy for many Christians and provides a rationale for Christian opposition to astrology to the present day. This was to influence Isidore, bishop of Seville (570-636), whose *Etymologiae*, was the first medieval Latin text to explicitly separate astronomy from astrology. Augustine had studied astrology during his time as Manichean and found he had no theological objection to it because astrologers neither offered sacrifices nor prayed to spirits for assistance in their divination. However, his conversion to Catholicism resulted in a substantial change of heart. He no longer regarded God as the only supreme power in the universe, with direct authority over all creatures. He tackled astrology in two levels. First he argued that it was incompatible with Christianity and second he pointed out illogicalities in its reasoning.

In the *Confessions* (IV.3) he claimed that to argue that God's authority could be exercised via the stars caused theological offence, for it both limited God's power to intervene directly in human affairs and implicated Him in the stars less admirable decisions. It also absolved human beings from responsibility for their own actions

and, ironically pushed that guilt on to God who had instructed the stars to cause men to sin. He widened his attack in the *City of God* (V.1-7), dealing at length with the issue of twins and how two babies born at the same time could have different lives. He also tackled the problem of the apparent contradiction between the astrally-determined fate inherent in an astrology of individual births with the assumption of free-will inherent in the astrological election of auspicious moments to begin new enterprises. He questioned whether astrology applied to worms or trees and challenged the belief that the rise of the Roman Empire had been astrologically determined rather than due to God's favour. He also dealt with the claim that astronomical alignments functioned as signs rather than causes and pointed out that even astrologers who argue that the stars signify events nevertheless talk as if they cause them, and hence are still impinging on territory rightly reserved for God. Augustine, *City of God*, V.1-7.

In book VII he went on to ridicule the flawed logic behind stellar divinities although in book V he had also sought allies amongst the pagans, appealing to them on the grounds that, if astrologers ascribed power over human affairs to the stars, they were challenging the authority of pagan deities as well as the Christian God.

Although Augustine regarded the reasoning behind astrology as profoundly flawed he had no doubt that it worked, although he changed his mind on how. In the *Confessions* he argued that it appeared to work because of chance. Thus an astrological forecast appeared to be right in the same way as a volume of poetry might fall open at a page which was meaningful at that moment. In the *City of God* he took a firmer line, claiming that evil spirits fed correct predictions to astrologers.

Augustine's attack on astrology should be seen as an attempt to de-spiritualise the universe, saving religious authority for God alone. His criticism of secular, liberal education and advocacy of Scripture as the ultimate source of truth also left little room for classical astronomy, leaving the Genesis creation story as the basis of Catholic cosmology. While his separation of astrology from astronomy was therefore of great significance, the effect of his teaching was to retard the development of astronomy in the Christian world until the seventeenth century.

The Confessions, book 4 chapter 3

"The same reasoning did not prevent me from consulting those impostors, the astrologers, because I argued that they offered no sacrifices and said no prayers to any spirit to aid their divination. Nevertheless, true Christian piety rightly rejects and condemns what they do. For sweet it is to praise the Lord and say Have mercy on me; bring healing to a soul that has sinned against you. And it is wrong to impose upon your readiness to forgive, taking it as licence to commit sin. Instead we must remember Our Lord's words to the cripple: You have recovered your strength. Do not sin any more, for fear that worse should befall you. This truth is our whole salvation, but the astrologers try to do away with it. They tell us that the cause of sin is determined in the heavens and we cannot escape it, and that this or that is the work of Venus or Saturn or Mars. They want us to believe that man is guiltless, flesh and blood though he is and doomed to die despite his pride. Instead they have it that the blame is to be laid on the Creator and Ruler of the heavens and the stars, none other than our God, himself the very source of justice, from whom its sweetness is derived -

on you, O God, who will award to every man what his acts have deserved, you who will never disdain a heart that is humbled and contrite.

There was at that time a man of deep understanding, who had an excellent reputation for his great skill as a doctor. As he was pro-consul at the time, his was the hand that laid upon my head the wreath I won in the poetry competition, but it was not a doctor's hand that could cure my disordered state of mind. This is a disease that only you can cure, you who thwart the proud and keep your grace for the humble. But you did not fail to use even that old man to help me, nor did you cease to give my soul through him the medicine which it needed. He and I became better acquainted and I listened intently and without fail to what he had to say, for though he was not a gifted speaker, his lively mind gave weight and charm to his words. In the course of our conversation he learned that I was an enthusiast for books of astrology, and in a kind and fatherly way he advised me to throw them away and waste no further pains upon such rubbish, because there were other more valuable things to be done. He said that as a young man he had studied astrology himself, intending to make a living by it, and that if he could understand Hippocrates I need no doubt that he had been able to master these textbooks as well. All the same, after a time he had given them up and taken to medicine instead, for the very good reason that he had found out that they were entirely wrong, and, being an honest man, he had no wish to earn his living by deception. "But you can support yourself by your rhetoric," he went on. "Your interest in this trickery is mere curiosity and you do not have to depend upon it for a living. All the more reason, then, why you should believe what I say, because, as it was to be my only means of support, I tried to learn as much about it as I could."

I asked him why it was then that the future was often correctly foretold by means of astrology. He gave me the only possible answer, that it was all due to the power of chance, a force that must always be reckoned with in the natural order. He said that people sometimes opened a book of poetry at random, and although the poet had been thinking, as he wrote, of some quite different matter, it often happened that the reader placed his finger on a verse which had a remarkable bearing on his problem. It was not surprising, then, that the mind of man, quite unconsciously, through some instinct not within its own control, should hit upon some thing that answered to the circumstances and the facts of a particular question. If so, it would be due to chance not to skill.

This answer which he gave me, or rather which I heard from his lips, must surely have come from you, my God. By means of it you imprinted on my mind doubts which I was to remember later, when I came to argue these matters out for myself. But at that time neither he nor my great friend, Nebridius - a young man of high principled and unexceptionable character, who ridiculed the whole business of soothsaying - could persuade me to give it up. I thought that the authors of the books made out a better case, and I had as yet found no evidence as positive as I required to prove beyond doubt that when the astrologers were found to be right, it was due to luck or pure chance and not to their skill in reading the stars'.

On Politics

Without any doubt, it is by divine providence that human kingdoms are set up. If any one ascribes them to 'fate' because he uses that term for the will or power of God, let him maintain his conviction but correct his language. ...For when men hear this word, ordinary usage leads them to think of nothing but the influence of the position of the stars at the moment when a

child is born...some make this independent of the will of God, while others maintain that it depends upon His will.

The City of God, the Loeb Classical Library, Book V Ch. I pp133-135.

On Stars as Omens or Causes

But sometimes it may be said that the stars portend, but do not cause those deeds, so that their position, which foretells the future, is a kind of communication, not an active

force. This view has been held by men of no ordinary learning. But the astrologers are not in the habit of saying, for instance: "Mars in this position portends a murderer," but "makes a murderer."¹⁵

The City of God, Loeb edition, p.137

On Augustine's Neo Platonism

'The effect of neo-Platonism was to free him from the shackles of materialism and to facilitate his acceptance of the idea of immaterial reality. In addition, the Plotinian conception of evil as privation rather than as something positive showed him how the problem of evil could be met without having to have recourse to the dualism of the Manichaeans. In other words, the function of neo-Platonism at this period was to render it possible for Augustine to see the reasonableness of Christianity....'

(Copplestone, A History of Philosophy, p. 42)

Plotinus did not believe that the planets represented evil, but only the 'less good. Therefore in natal horoscopy, they could cause neither good nor evil, but only represents possibilities. He thought that Matter produced the less good from its own stock. He did agree that there were necessarily opposites, and believed that they worked together towards positive results.⁸ The good only changed to evil in the material world, for man was himself dualistic, as Plotinus demonstrates in his explanation of wealth coming to the good by correct means, but to the unprincipled it came by wickedness, including that of the giver of the wealth.⁹

Plotinus, The Enneads, translated by Stephen' MacKenna, Larson Publications, 1992, # 16 on p.116

But, even Augustine could never challenge the belief that there was a link between life on earth and the stars. After all, Basil had noted the sense in weather lore. The sun's relation to the seasons, and the moon's to the tides were undeniable. But were they astrology? Augustine thought not, and reluctantly conceded that not just solar and lunar, but stellar, including planetary influences, had to be acknowledged:

Now it could be maintained, without utter absurdity, that some influences from the stars have an effect on variations confined to the physical realm. We observe that the variation of the seasons depends on the approach and withdrawal of the sun, and the waxing and waning of the moon produces growth and diminution in certain species, such as sea-urchins and shell-fish, and also the marvellous variation of the tides.¹

¹. Augustine, *City of God*, Book V, 6.

For Ptolemy the moon's effect on the tides was the fundamental rationale for a full-blown astrology of human character and destiny. Augustine himself, though, couldn't see the connection. In his view there was no way that one could logically move from the natural observation that there was a celestial correspondence with the seasons to the conclusion that human choice is subject to the disposition of the stars. His concession to natural astrology, or Cicero's divination from nature was, in terms of the fourth-century, a statement of the obvious, for the reality of seasonal influences was not open to question. Even his concession that the stars might influence the body, though, was to prove a Trojan horse for astrology within the Christian world. If, for example, the moon was to be taken into account in medical treatment, then why shouldn't horoscopes be cast?

Web

The Confessions on line

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/conf/>

City of God on line

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm>
