

CONFESSING WITH SAINT AUGUSTINE

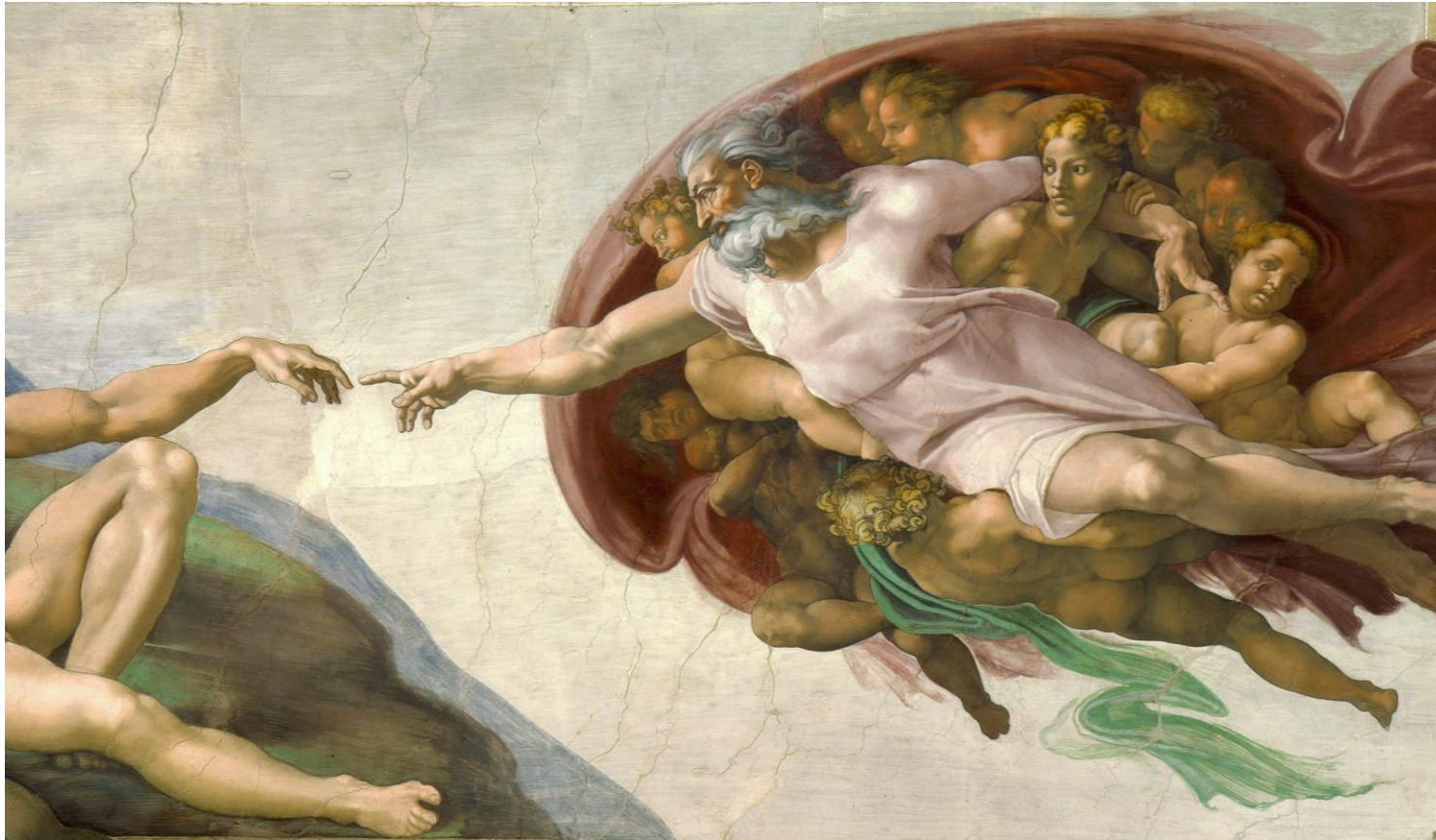
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Dr Angus M Slater





8 — AUGUSTINE ON CREATION



OUTLINE

1. Characteristics of Augustine's interpretation of Genesis
2. Creational theology:
 - The Creator
 - The origin of the world: creation from nothing
 - Aspects of creation: what is creation like?
3. The significance of creation

AUGUSTINE,
CONFESSIONS X:6
(8)

“Heaven and earth and everything in them on all sides tell me to love [God].

But when I love you, what do I love?

It is not physical beauty, nor temporal glory, nor the brightness of light dear to earthly eyes, nor the sweet melodies of all kinds of things; it is not these I love when I love my God.”

AUGUSTINE,
CONFESSIONS X:6
(9)

“And what is the object of my love?

I asked the earth and it said: “It is not I”. I asked all that is in it; they made the same confession. And I said to all these things in my external environment: “Tell me of my God who you are not, tell me something about him”.

And with a great voice they cried out: “He made us”. (Ps. 99:3)”

AUGUSTINE'S INTEREST IN CREATION

“The effort to think through the mystery of creation runs like a leitmotif through Augustine’s work.”
(Edmund Hill, “Introduction,” *On Genesis*, 13)

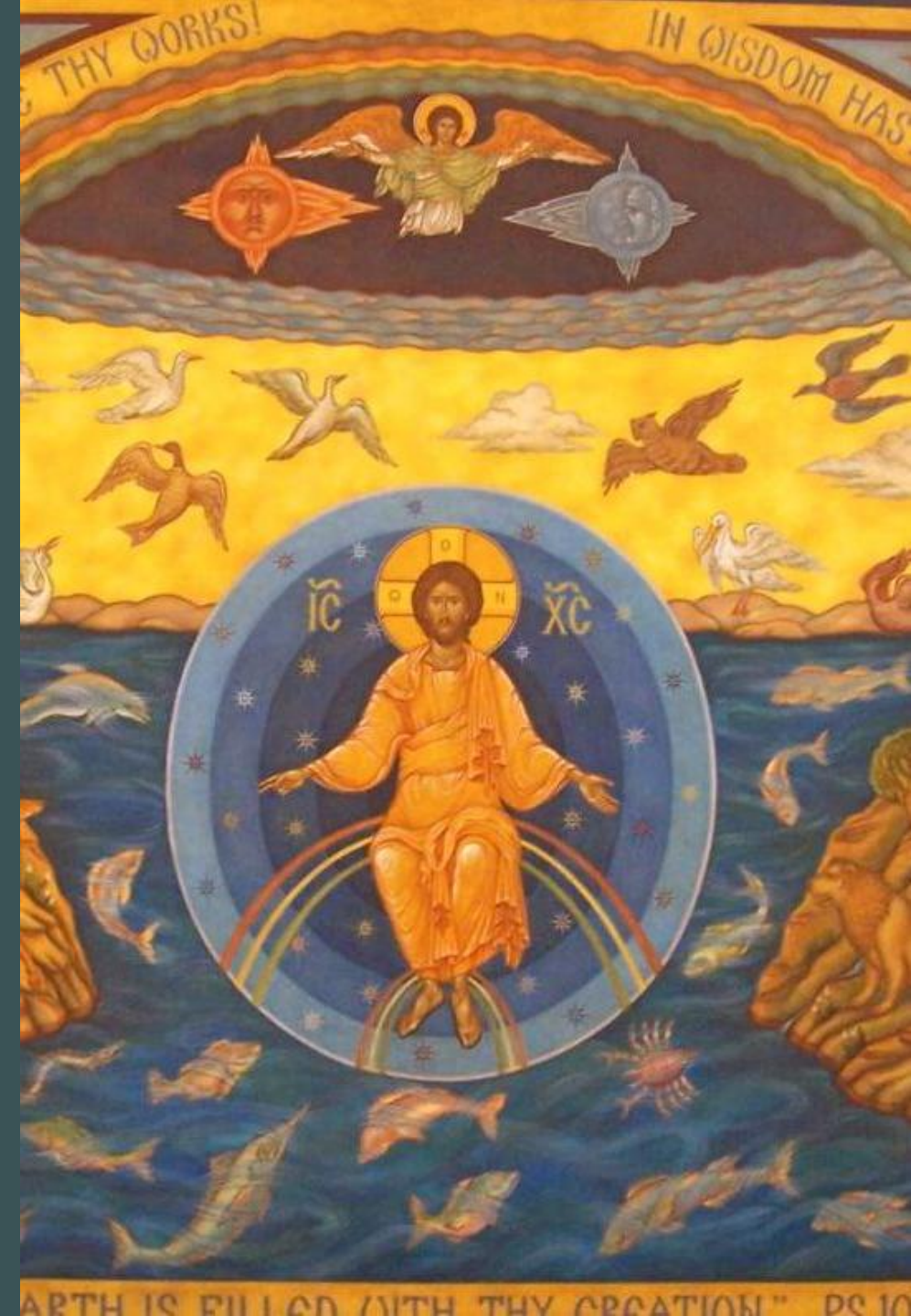
Augustine’s theology of creation can be seen as the interpretive key for *Confessions*.

Augustine’s focus:

The act of creation (the origin of the universe)

Facets of creaturely existence — matter, space, time; features, order.

The significance of the existence of creation — its relation to the Creator.





AUGUSTINE: WORKS EXAMINING CREATION

Three Genesis commentaries:

- On Genesis: A Refutation Against the Manichees (388/389)
- Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis (393-395)
- The Literal Meaning of Genesis (401-416)

Confessions, Books 11-12
(397-401)

City of God, Book 11 (c.
416)

HOW DOES AUGUSTINE INTERPRET GENESIS?

Anti-Manichaean: non-dualistic (vs Manichaean dualistic principles of Light and Darkness; the world's existence arising from a combat between two kingdoms)

Meanings of Scripture

- Multiple layers of meaning
- Literal not “literalist”
- God actually created matter. (For instance, Paradise was actually created, and does not signify merely a spiritual reality.)
- Literal and spiritual/figurative sense of Scripture



HOW DOES AUGUSTINE INTERPRET GENESIS?

Asks questions about creation – not merely making affirmations.

Various interpretations of the same passage

The faith of the Church provides the main framework and direction for interpretation.

Focus: on its theological meaning, not on natural science.





CREATOR AND CREATION |



THE CREATOR

God is utterly different from creation – transcendent; immutable; no creaturely categories apply to God.

Divine will: God does not create out of necessity, but freely; creates out of free choice.

Divine omnipotence: no need for other causes for creation; no need for a “material substrate” to create anything – God produces out of (but not from) His own being; creation does not add to God’s life.

Divine good will and love for creation



ACT OF CREATION

Creation from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*)
– not from God or pre-existent material

God created creation from a basic, unformed material which itself was made from nothing.

Creation and Preservation:

- creation depends on God preserving its existence;
- this includes operating things set in place (affecting constellations, earthly processes)



ACT OF CREATION

Simultaneous creation (***Creavit omnia simul***) – in an instant; matter and spirit; the days of creation signify the “order of reality” or “gradations of being” (Tornau, “Augustine”; cf. Stöckl.)

Seminal reasons (***rationes seminales; rationes causales***) – implanted or “inbuilt principles” regulating organisms and their characteristic activities.

CREATION AND THE TRINITY

All three persons of the Trinity are active in creation.

The Word:

God the Father expresses Himself and all other things in the Word (co-eternal with God):

- “Let it be made” – God’s incorporeal utterance through the Word, so that creation can be formed in a particular way. (Augustine, Lit. Gen. 1:9)
- “In the beginning” (Gen. 1:1) – sometimes interpreted as the Word or Son of God – “In this beginning, God, you made heaven and earth, in your Word.” (Augustine, Confessions XI: 9.11)
- Divine ideas (or primal causes) are expressed in the Word.



THE HOLY SPIRIT IN CREATION

The Holy Spirit:

“The Spirit was borne over the water” (Gen. 1:2) – not literal water; the will; another name for “formless basic matter”; “borne over what he loves” – God creates out of “abundant generosity.” (Augustine, Lit. Gen. I:12)



TIME AND ORDER IN CREATION |

FEATURES OF CREATION

Finite and mutable: limited in time and space

Creation a “realm in which good or beauty or stability is being sought and being formed.” (Rowan Williams, “Good for Nothing?,” 18).

A “tendency towards nothingness” — creation depends on divine preservation.



GOD, CREATION AND TIME

Time: “Lord, eternity is yours [.]” (Augustine, Confessions XI:1, 221)

Past, present and future depend on the eternal God.

God created time — “while resting in timeless eternity himself.” (See Augustine, Confessions XI:16)

Time began with the beginning of motion; created with the world.



THE EXPERIENCE OF TIME

Distension (*distentio*) of the soul: time (past, present and future) is experienced by us through memory, attention, and expectation respectively. (Augustine, Confessions XI:26)

Plotinian notion:

- falling away scattered in multiplicity from the One.



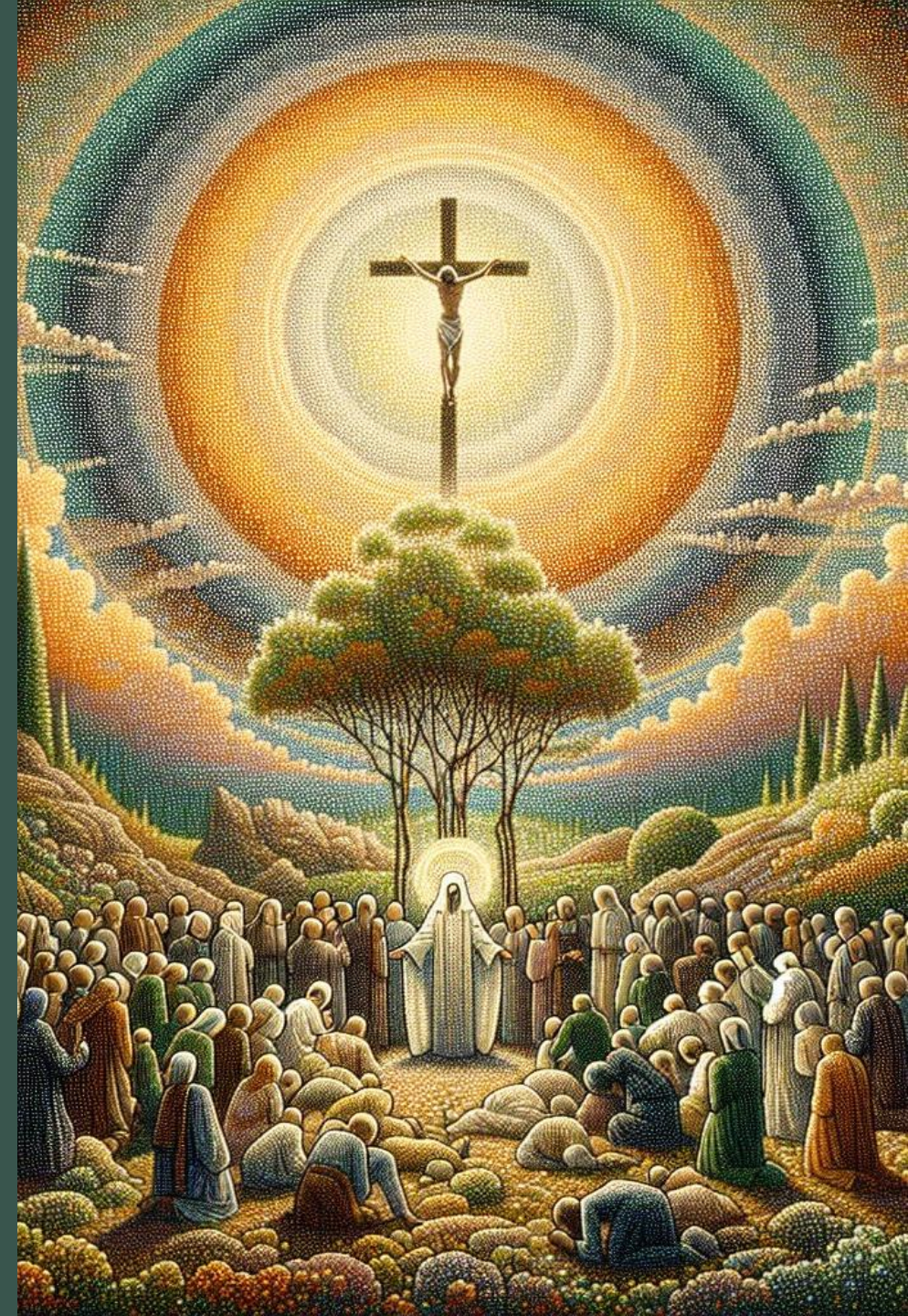
THE GOODNESS OF CREATION

Creation is caused by the good (God)

What came into existence by God's goodness is necessarily good

Creatures are good by participation in the Creator's goodness.

Creation is corruptible (through natural evils such as death and suffering); but matter itself is not evil



THE ORDER OF CREATION

The cosmos is a “coherent system” which “operates as a whole.” (Williams, “Good for Nothing?”, 14.)

Balance of things in the natural order, rather than chaos of things.

Divine wisdom establishes a place for everything in the order; God governs things to their “appointed end” by divine providence.



THE ORDER OF CREATION

Form (**forma**): concerning features, structure; “spiritual patterns” (Schaeffer, “Mode, Form, and Natural Order,” 64.)

Natural order (ordo): levels of creation

Mode (modus): that which differentiates things (number, extension of things): God disposes things by “measure, number, and weight” (Wisdom 11:21)





THE MEANING OF CREATION

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Each thing exists in its own way — each has its own harmony in itself.

Man as microcosm: humans share characteristics with inanimate, vegetative and animal creatures (having being, life, and sensuous faculties) — and with angels (reason).

Vestiges of the divine (*vestigia trinitatis* — the Trinity)



THE MEANING OF CREATION

Creation also signifies something about God: God causes “harmonious effects”; a source of harmony; creation is modelled on divine perfections.

Creation mirrors the Creator’s beauty and goodness (yet is unlike God).

Creation desires equilibrium – reflecting a desire for divine stability.

We respond to “something prior to us.” (Williams, “Good for Nothing?,” 12-13)



THE END OF CREATION

God guides things to their end by divine providence.

A purpose to creation – creation is not merely a collection of processes. (Williams, “Good for Nothing?,” 15)

Creation is a “vessel of praise.” (Charles Matthews, “Worldly Augustinianism,” 342.)

Loving God: God loves us so we can know our highest good – God. (Rowan Williams, “Good for Nothing?,” 20)



AUGUSTINE'S VISION OF THE TRUE AND PROPER ENDS OF CREATION

Creation exists because God freely wills it to exist.

Everything that exists derives its being and goodness from God.

Creation is fundamentally good because its source is the supreme Good.

Created things are finite, mutable, and therefore cannot provide ultimate fulfilment.

The proper end of creation is to participate in and reflect God's goodness.

Humanity's ultimate end is to return to God, its source and highest good.

Created goods should be loved, but always in proper order.

Disordered love occurs when creatures are loved more than the Creator.

The world is not an end in itself but points beyond itself to God.

Creation finds its fulfilment in eternal rest and communion with God.

AUGUSTINE,
CONFESSIONS,
XII:1

*“My humble tongue makes
confessions to your transcendent
majesty that you were maker of
heaven and earth – this heaven
which I see, the earth which I
tread underfoot and is the
source of the earthly body which
I carry.”*

SUMMARY

There is a clear distinction between Creator and creation.

God creates everything, matter, space and time, from nothing; God also preserves creation – a testament to divine will and omnipotence.

God (the Trinity) creates creation as an intelligible, hierarchical structure; creatures possess specific features; creation can be discerned according to gradations or levels of being (inanimate, animate, rational creation).

Although radically different from God, creation can be interpreted as revealing aspects of the Creator (vestiges or traces; divine goodness.)



READING

Confessions, Book XII

Williams, Rowan. "'Good For Nothing'?: Augustine on Creation. *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994): 9-24.

Schaefer, Mathewes. "A Wordly Augustinianism: Augustine's Sacramental Vision of Creation." *Augustinian Studies* 41:1 (2010): 333-348.

