

Augustine's Understanding of the Image of God as seen in his earliest commentaries on Genesis

‘On Genesis against the Manichees’ and,

‘On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book’

(Using online translation by Roland J. Teske, 1991)

Key verses

from the two creation accounts...

²⁶ Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26,27)

⁷ then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground,
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life;
and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)



The image of God is a key concept but...

There is very little explanation in scripture as to what it actually means

Traditionally 3 main views:

- Substantialist
- Functional
- Relational

In reality theologians, church leaders and the faithful tend to have overlapping beliefs even if they favour one idea over another

Interpretation impacted by many different cultural, historical factors resulting in a continually evolving theology of God's image

On Genesis against the Manichees c. 388,389 CE

Composed not long after his conversion, before he was a priest

Apologetic work

On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book c. 393 CE

Unfinished, but later added some paragraphs which reflect how his views had developed

Augustine 354 – 430 CE

- Catholic mother, close relationship, middle class family, educated

Bishop Ambrose of Milan, prepared him for baptism and sermons, interpretation of scripture

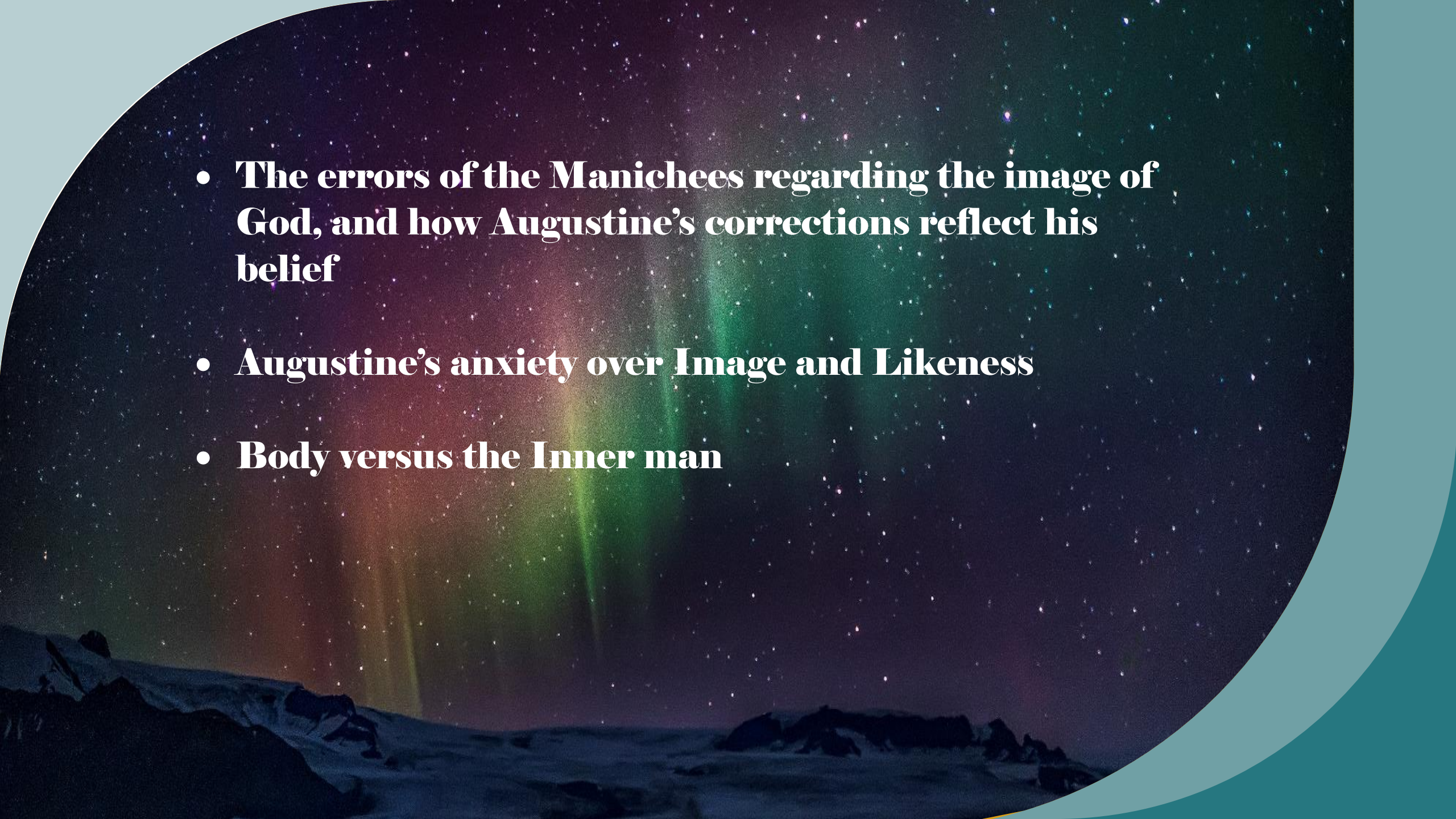
Neoplatonism – belief in a hierarchical reality, transcendent ‘the One’ at the top, then from that, divine intellect (nous), then the Soul including reason, intellect, bottom level material/visible/changeable

- **Manichaeism** –focus on reason, dualistic struggle between good/spirit/light and evil/matter/dark

The soul must be saved by special knowledge (nous)

Rejected the OT

Rejected marriage

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- **The errors of the Manichees regarding the image of God, and how Augustine's corrections reflect his belief**
 - **Augustine's anxiety over Image and Likeness**
 - **Body versus the Inner man**

The errors of the Manichees regarding the image of God, and how Augustine's corrections reflect his belief

The question of how man is made in God's image, is the one 'above all' that the Manichees taunt the believer with

Does God have teeth etc – this is absurd, wicked, refers to N.T. use of bodily language, scripture's use of anthropomorphisms, should be understood spiritually

Their literal interpretation misses the point – it's not just Augustine that believes in spiritual interpretation, also leaders of the Catholic faith believe God is not limited by bodily form

Man was not made to the image of God – being made to the image means the interior man 'where reason and intellect reside'

They see material bodies as bad - Our body is made erect so we can raise our minds upwards, 'we are better than the beasts'

They say man doesn't have power over the natural world – Augustine concedes we don't have complete power, we've lost perfection but 'what ought we to think of that reign of his, which is promised to him by the word of God, once he has been renewed and set free? '(DGnM 1.29) – we can look forward to restoration/perfection again

The errors of the Manichees 2nd Account

They interpret literally again – he will interpret the text historically and prophetically. Uses allegory and refers to the parable of the wheat and tares to explain the ‘green of the field’ is understood as the soul

They are concerned with the literal material, view text in a ‘carnal manner’- use of mud and water shows a harmony between body and soul, this mixing prevents the body from falling ‘into dissolution’

Their wrong interpretations are because of pride, they dare to say the soul is the nature of God –Augustine refers to scripture paraphrases uses both OT and NT –St Paul

Manichees view of soul as divine spark – the soul is made, they mis-interpret "And he breathed into him the breath of life, and man became a living soul."

They say God is in misery, his nature is changeable, less powerful,

It is created beings who are in a state of sin because of our will, God’s nature is unchangeable, just, incorruptible, perfect

Image and Likeness for Augustine

‘let us make man to our image and likeness’

At pains to avoid any deification,

image is linked to origin, God is the origin, the image and the first likeness

We are like God by participation

We are not an equal image to Christ

Image is linked to its origin i.e. God

- ***‘Every image is like that of which it is an image, but not everything which is like something is also its image. Thus, because in a mirror or in a picture there are images, they are also like. But if the one does not have its origin from the other, it is not said to be the image of the other. For it is an image only when it is derived***
 - ***from the other thing’*** (DGnI 16.56)

Body versus the Inner Man

The Body

Pre-fall...

‘the chaste union of male and female, of the former to rule, of the latter to obey, and there was the spiritual offspring of intelligible and immortal joys filling the earth, that is, giving life to the body and ruling it.’ (DGn M 1.19.30)

The body is to be controlled, ruled over, carnal

But it is part of a good creation – the mixing of the mud and water and an erect body

‘Perhaps the fact that the human figure is erect for gazing upon heaven carries some weight so that one might believe that the body also was made to the likeness of God.’ (DGn I 16.60)

Body versus the Inner Man

The Inner Man

It is reason that sets man apart from the other animals

The interior mind needs to keep a check on the appetite of the soul
and that is how the body is controlled

Emotions need to be kept in harmony with reason

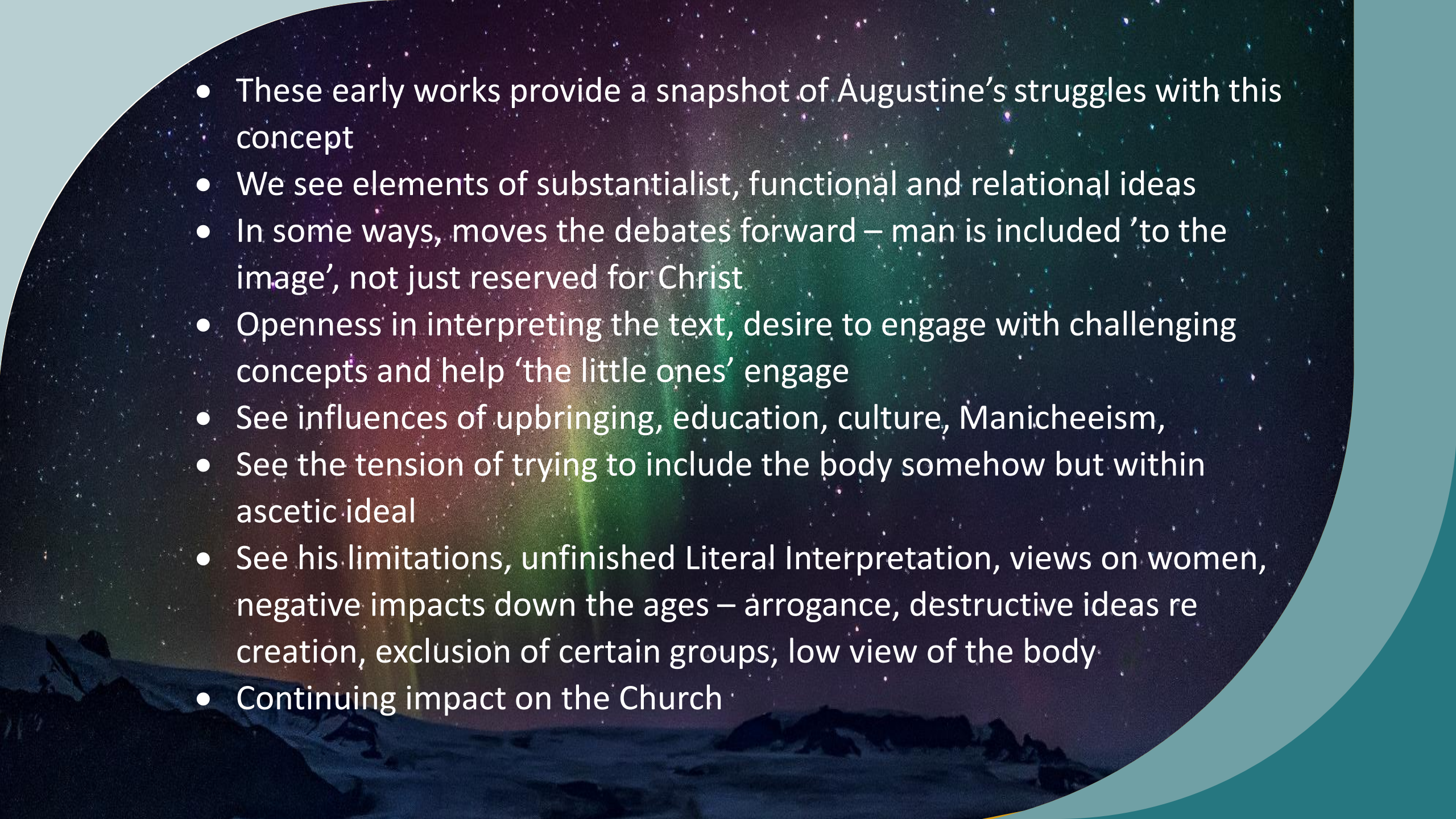
As the inner man looks toward God, he is more 'to the image'

Pre Fall, the body/inner man are in harmony – the body is ruled over

Post Fall,

'if reason consents and decides that what desire has stirred up should be carried out, man is expelled from the whole happy life as if from paradise'
(DGn M 2.14.21)

'The first Adam was made into a living soul; the last Adam into a lifegiving spirit'(DGnM 2.8.11)

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- These early works provide a snapshot of Augustine's struggles with this concept
 - We see elements of substantialist, functional and relational ideas
 - In some ways, moves the debates forward – man is included 'to the image', not just reserved for Christ
 - Openness in interpreting the text, desire to engage with challenging concepts and help 'the little ones' engage
 - See influences of upbringing, education, culture, Manicheism,
 - See the tension of trying to include the body somehow but within ascetic ideal
 - See his limitations, unfinished Literal Interpretation, views on women, negative impacts down the ages – arrogance, destructive ideas re creation, exclusion of certain groups, low view of the body
 - Continuing impact on the Church

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And the Word became flesh and lived among us...