



The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/0199246955.001.0001>

Published: 13 December 2001

Online ISBN: 9780191600463

Print ISBN: 9780199246953

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CHAPTER

48 Augustine

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/0199246955.003.0049> Pages 473–478

Published: December 2001

Abstract

Presents a brief account of Augustine's (354–430) life and ideas. The question of his conversion is considered through examination of his autobiographical writings. Augustine defended his sombre view of human moral capacities and his concept of predestination against Donatists, Pelagians, and Manichees, but 'the heart of his religion is in the sermons' and he was capable of admitting mistakes as well as stoutly defending his work against criticism.

Keywords: Augustine

Subject: Early Christianity, Religion in the Ancient World, History of Christianity

Collection: Oxford Scholarship Online

Born on 13 November 354, the son of a small-time farmer at Thagaste (Souk-Ahras in north-east Algeria) and a Christian mother Monnica, Augustine's training was as a teacher of the liberal arts, notably Latin literature ('grammar'), rhetoric or the art of persuasive public speaking, and logic. He was also informed about arithmetic, geometry, musical theory (though he never wrote a book on pitch), astronomy and medicine. Love of Cicero's prose and Vergil's poetry permanently marked his style. He also much admired the sombre writings of Sallust and knew well the comedies of Terence. Occasional allusive quotations from Juvenal and Seneca show him at home there. Aged 18, he read Cicero's defence of philosophy, the (lost) dialogue *Hortensius*, offering a guide to life and happiness. Briefly he picked up parts of the Bible, but was repelled by the banausic style of the Old Latin version, by the patriarchs' polygamy, and by the two divergent genealogies of Jesus. In any event he was attracted by the Manichee theosophy and explanation of the problem of evil, namely that while God is good, he is not all-powerful. For a decade he associated with a Manichee ascetic community, which did not discourage him from acquiring a concubine of low class sharing bed and board with her in much contentment. By her he had an unintended son Adeodatus who was educated as an orthodox Catholic; a boy of high intelligence, he died at the age of 16. In his memory Augustine wrote on non-verbal communication, often discussed with his son; gestures and tone of voice are more revealing than words, which in any event are

incapable of expressing the deepest things. Texts show that in this age it was normal for young men to take a concubine until such time as they were earning their living and could acquire a regular wife.

p. 474 In adult life he earned his bread by teaching, but riotous students at Carthage made him aspire to a similar post in Rome. There, however, he found the students evading payment of their fees. With the support of the powerful pagan prefect Aurelius Symmachus he was able to get a teaching post at Milan, residence of the western emperor Valentinian II as also of ↪ Bishop Ambrose, who personally welcomed him to the city and was held in deep respect by his widowed mother Monnica, who followed her son to Italy. At Milan he met a Neoplatonic circle, and was convinced by Plotinus' account of providence and the problem of evil, especially his thesis that God can transform evil to good ends. He was attracted by hearing Ambrose preach sermons fusing high oratory with Christianized Neoplatonic themes, and especially deploying Philonic allegory to interpret the Old Testament in a way 'worthy of God'. Ambition made him aspire to become governor of some minor province (the kind of post to which well-educated literary men were often appointed), but for that end he needed money to grease the palms of the high court officials or at least to express gratitude to them afterwards. So he needed a wife with resources. Monnica found for him a suitable girl, though too young for wedding, and Augustine's concubine had to be sent back to Carthage, the breach being a source of deep pain for both partners. But she would hardly have been suitable for a provincial governor, which in any event he could not become without money. Public offices were for sale.

Conversion

Augustine's sex drive was strong, but left him feeling incomplete. In Ambrose he encountered a man obviously happy, yet unmarried. Ambrose's sermons taught him that the catholic faith of the universal Church was other than he had supposed. The level of preaching in north Africa had been inferior. Without having close personal contact with Ambrose he was inexorably drawn to conversion, spurred on by the tedium of calling on powerful senators in hope of gaining their support for his ambition, and made the decision under extreme stress in a friend's garden at Milan in July or August 386. The scene is brilliantly and poetically described (with sophisticated literary allusions) in the eighth book of his later *Confessions*. Conversion for him meant a celibate life, though at the time he had no intention of offering for the priesthood. Neoplatonist ideals combined with the apostle Paul convinced him that he must forgo his plans for a secular career and for the marriage that was to make that financially possible. Monnica, although she had been looking forward to grandchildren, was glad at his change of heart. On Easter Eve 387 he was baptized by Ambrose, and accepted the forgiveness of his past sins. The archaeologists' spade has excavated the font below the Duomo at Milan. Some decades later he retained a vivid memory of Ambrose's catechetical discourses (*Fid. et Op.* 9).

p. 475 Return to north Africa was delayed by the civil war between Theodosius and Magnus Maximus which closed down the ferries, and during the wait at Ostia Monnica died. The description of her dying and requiem is a high emotional climax of the *Confessions*. Her tomb was accidentally discovered in ↪ 1945 when some boys were digging a hole for their basketball post. An admirer of Augustine's *Confessions* had erected a memorial inscription there. In 388 Augustine was back in Thagaste with a society of friends sharing his family house and studying the Bible and Neoplatonic themes. In Rome Augustine had read Jerome's 22nd letter to Eustochium, describing the monasteries of Egypt, and was moved to write a book (*De moribus*) to argue that the catholic Church was a better home for the ascetic life than Manichee communities. He wanted to found monastic houses attached to north African churches.

On a visit to the harbour town of Hippo in 391 with this end in view, he attended the Sunday morning service. The bishop, Valerius, a native Greek-speaker who owned estate in southern Italy, espied him in the congregation and preached a sermon telling his congregation that here was an ideal man to become presbyter in Hippo; he was already noted for Latin eloquence. At Hippo people were not readers of books, as they were at

Carthage (so expressly *ep.* 118. 9), and if they knew the story of Dido and Aeneas that was from the local music-hall, not from Vergil. Augustine found himself mobbed by the *plebs*, and forced to accept ordination at Valerius' hands. In Africa this was a common procedure which admittedly led to some unsuitable ordinations, for Augustine himself once records that north Africa had few churches where clergy had not been removed from office (*c. litt. Petil.* 3. 32. 36; cf. *ep.* 208. 2 on some bishops whose motive was only the secular honour). 'The Church is often deceived in those from whom much is hoped' (*ep.* 93. 34).

Five years later Valerius felt his end coming and persuaded the elderly primate of Numidia to come to Hippo to consecrate Augustine as coadjutor bishop with right of succession. Though the council of Nicaea disapproved of having two bishops in one city (a rule of which Augustine and probably all bishops in Numidia knew nothing), it was not without precedent (*Eus. HE* 7. 32. 21). For personal reasons the proposal caused a storm. There were those who remembered his past, his sex life and theosophy in particular, and suspected his monastic enthusiasm of being a concealed infiltration of Manichee practices. Adherents of Mani had houses with similar lifestyle. At Rome Augustine had met a wealthy Manichee who tried unsuccessfully to form an ascetic house (*c. Faustum* 5. 5). The primate received letters attacking the unsuitable plan and wrote to Valerius a letter damaging to Augustine which came into Donatist hands and was exploited. To a married woman he had given some blessed bread, which critics asserted to be a love-charm intended to further an inappropriate affair. (Clergy could be asked for such assistance.) The consecration, however, went ahead. 'No one has the right to refuse ordination' (*Qu. Hept.* 4. 54). One of Augustine's motives in writing his partly autobiographical *Confessions* was to vindicate himself, not only before Christian critics but also in answer to educated pagans who could not forgive him for abandoning his distinguished literary career. The *Confessions* is a book with close affinities to anti-Manichee tracts written in the same period. He needed to answer suggestions that he was a crypto-Manichee.

A stimulus for writing the *Confessions* came from an accidental correspondence between his pupil Alypius, lately made bishop of Thagaste, and the *grand seigneur* from Bordeaux, Paulinus.² A pupil of Ausonius and a poet, Paulinus had been governor of Campania and owned estates there and elsewhere. Ordained at Barcelona, he decided to retire to Nola in Campania with his wife and to build a shrine in honour of St Felix for whose assistance he felt gratitude. He replied to Alypius suggesting an exchange of letters on the way in which each had been led to adopt the ascetic life of a bishop. Alypius shared this letter with Augustine; he had sent Paulinus some of Augustine's anti-Manichee writings, asking for a copy of Eusebius' *Chronicle* in exchange. The sixth book of the *Confessions* includes a brief biography of Alypius. Paulinus and Augustine exchanged a number of letters, and at Paulinus' inquiry Augustine wrote 'on proper care for the dead', discouraging Paulinus from thinking that burial in proximity to a saint's tomb must necessarily be advantageous hereafter.³

The selection of autobiographical matter in the first nine books was designed to show the course of his life which had led him to be bishop at Hippo. A striking theme is the providential overruling of events, at the time apparently purely secular, that eventually led him to Milan and Ambrose. Nevertheless the work is only in outward form an autobiography; the last four books discuss memory, time, creation, and the allegorical meaning of Genesis 1, where the creation story is interpreted of the Church and its providential functions on behalf of humanity. The autobiographical chapters illustrate the wandering homelessness of the human soul alienated from God and in quest of peace and inward repose (a notable Plotinian theme). Time as a succession of mainly meaningless events is what the eternal God of love wants to rescue us from. Plotinus had seen time as in itself beyond our understanding, but intelligible if contrasted with eternity and if seen as given meaning by the goal to which history moves. God is found in the deepest level of the soul, in the subconscious where the soul longs for completeness. 'You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you.' 'At long last I came to love you, beauty so old and yet so new . . . You were within me, and I had been seeking you in the external world' (*Conf.* 1. 1; 10. 38).

A leading theme is the dependence of humanity on divine grace for a good moral life. We have no merits which are not God's gifts (*Conf.* 9. 34; 10. 64). God has commanded continence and if that is attained, it is by his gift.

p. 477 The language of the *Confessions* is sophisticated, and an undercurrent in the work is a demonstration that he a Christian can write creatively and beautifully and with the adornment of allusions to Vergil or Terence that contemporary pagans of high education liked. The same undercurrent is beneath the surface in his major work on Christian culture, *De doctrina Christiana*, in which he defines a Christian curriculum based on scripture.

At first Valerius had allowed Augustine as presbyter time to study the Bible and to acquire a better knowledge of Christian doctrine. Scripture had played no part whatever in his education. What he knew by heart consisted of pagan classics. His eloquence made him much in demand for addressing episcopal synods. He influenced Aurelius, primate of Carthage, to mobilize synodical action against the schismatic Donatists, and was to play a central role in rebutting the Stoic ideas of Pelagius about the capacity of the human will to do what is right and good. Augustine understood the human mind to have amazing powers and at the end of the *City of God* gives a vast list of artistic and technological achievements. Yet he saw humanity as flawed by egocentricity, expert in knowledge (*scientia*) but sadly deficient in wisdom (*sapientia*), prone to mendacity.

'No one who has not been a bishop would believe what we are expected to do', he once lamented. The administrative and financial cares; the frequent need to arbitrate between disputing members of his flock; problems when an illtreated slave sought asylum at the altar and the owner was a powerful landowner sure of support from the magistrates; anxiety when a man owing large sums in tax succeeded in getting himself elected a bishop so that the debt could be transferred to the church chest ('I have never before known a bishopric used as a tax-fiddle'); bishops whose hospitality duties made them alcoholics; illusory expectations among his people that he would have influence with governors or their deputies to intercede on their behalf, whether for a job, or because they were involved in litigation; their anger if he refused a benefaction because of the strings attached (e.g. obligation to replace a ship in the event of shipwreck); endless matrimonial cases on which distressed partners, especially wives ('infidelity is a male disease'), came to consult him; a tenant farmer who sold his wife to a slavetrader and replied to Augustine's protests that he preferred the money; the low level of ethical commitment among many of his people ('drunk in church and especially at martyrs' shrines'); 'the church almost swamped by a multitude of adherents whose morals are at variance with the way of the saints'; some who consulted their astrologer to discover when it would be a good day to become a Christian; the catalogue of a bishop's 'rucksack' (*sarcina*) is unending. Hardest of all was to be vulnerable to alternating flattery and vituperation.

p. 478 Alaric's brief sack of Rome in August 410 made many ask how the eternal city could be allowed by providence to succumb to the barbarians, how the patron saints Peter and Paul could fail to defend a city claimed as their own, and how an empire whose emperor worshipped the true and supreme God could suffer such humiliation. The temple of Romulus now had far fewer devotees than Constantine's church housing the shrine of St Peter (Aug. *En. in Ps.* 44. 23). Augustine had been meditating long on the problem of divine providence in human history, and his reading of Lactantius' *Divine Institutes* had already influenced an early tract 'On true religion' in ways which were to be developed. The *City of God* opposes the symbols Jerusalem and Babylon as contrasting ethical ideals, Babylon representing fallen humanity, 'the city of the devil', Jerusalem being the people of God in the Old and the New Testaments and in the Church. Having a Christian emperor had not made the empire Christian. It might have political virtues, but the lust for dominion had not died away. In any event Augustine thought that smaller units would be easier to administer with justice. Half a century after his time the western empire was in process of being replaced by independent barbarian kingdoms.

A major work designed to rebut pagan critics was on the doctrine of the one God as Trinity. The work took many years to write, and when finished left Augustine deeply dissatisfied. The Neoplatonic idea of the soul helped him to affirm unity and trinity to be present in human psychology. The term 'substance' and above all 'persons' can only be inadequate, used because the alternative is silence. The inspired prologue to St John's Gospel shows that the Word of God is second in the Trinity. Threeness is to be found in the inner relation of love in the being of God. Argument with Neoplatonist themes pervades his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, the literalness being the actuality of divine creation, and his cautious work *On the Soul*. Although his idea of the

transmission of Adam's sin by heredity obviously implied that the soul is transmitted through the parental seed and egg, he was never willing to affirm this, mainly because it easily sounded Manichee.

Theosophical Manichees, schismatic Donatists, and Pelagians shocked by his sombre estimate of human moral capacities occupied much of his energies, but not all. The heart of his religion is in the sermons, especially those on St John's Gospel and Epistles and on the Psalms.

Augustine died on 28 August 430 during the Vandal siege of Hippo. His last recorded words were a quotation from Plotinus. His last lengthy book was a Reappraisal of his writings (*Retractationes*), in about half the books correcting faults, and in the other half defending his works against criticisms. He once commented that only fools never express regret for their mistakes.

Notes

- 1 On Augustine I have written at greater length in the Oxford series Past Masters (1980), reissued 2001.
- 2 Dennis E. Trout, *Paulinus of Nola* (Berkeley, 1999).
- 3 On burial beside a saint, see Ambrose, *De excessu fratris* i. 18; Yvette Duval, *Auprès des saints corps et âme; l'inhumation ad sanctos* (Paris, 1988) especially discussing Augustine, *De cura pro mortuis gerenda*.