

UNIT SIX: Augustine of Hippo: the incomparable person

Introductory reading:

Chadwick, chapters 46, 47, 48; Kelly XIII 5-7

1. A restless heart

Whilst the Cappadocian Fathers were laying the foundation for a thoroughly Christian concept of 'personhood,' their near contemporary the Latin Father, Augustine, was emerging the first modern person. His prolific writings, his unsparing introspection, his indefatigable championing of Catholic Christianity together ensure that his personality is, in one way or another, available in vivid detail centuries after his death. By dint of the sheer volume of his writings, Augustine has become over the centuries an authority in a staggering array of debates. He has become far and away the most influential Latin Father. The tension between the minute particularity of Augustine as a person, and the grand sweep of his theological influence, is unmistakable. One of the great temptations in studying Augustine is to resolve that tension simply by relating Augustine's life – a manoeuvre that is at least partially vindicated by Augustine's own thoroughly theological autobiography, the *Confessions* – and so by accounting for his various opinions as responses to the circumstances in which he lived. And indeed, he lived in an age of rapid and dramatic change that corresponds neatly to his own constant changing. His writings attest to the evolution of his thinking and thus provide support for a range of positions (not all of which are mutually consistent). His life was caught up in the history of the declining western empire, but we also can trace some of elusive changes within the man himself in his *Confessions*, the most celebrated of ancient autobiographies. The schoolboy weeping over the old story of Dido and Aeneas comes to the end of his life in 430 as the Catholic bishop of a North African port besieged by the war bands of a tribe that had ultimately come from southern Sweden. There is no doubt that Augustine was a man of his time; but to appreciate the abiding significance of his legacy, we will use the framework of his biography to relate the major theological themes of his writings.

He was born in 354 in the small town of Thagaste (modern Souk Ahras in eastern Algeria). He grew up in the culture of post-Constantinian Roman North Africa, a culture that was at least nominally Christian. His family belonged to the Church through the unrelenting devotion of his all-absorbing mother Monica who was deeply wounded by her son's rebellions. He was enrolled as a catechumen for eventual baptism when the morally dangerous years of his adolescence were past for post-baptismal sins were harshly treated by the Church. With the financial help of a rich neighbour Monica's brilliant son was sent to the provincial capital Carthage to study the standard subject of Roman higher education – rhetoric – the art of speaking and writing correct and eloquent Latin on the basis of the study of the best literary models. Good Latin prose

was essential to enter the ruling elite, in public life and in the art of persuasion. Augustine excelled in these studies and went on to teach them himself. He taught rhetoric first in Carthage, then in Rome, and finally from 384-386 in Milan, which was at this time the seat of the imperial government. Teaching the sons of the elite he could make the write contacts, and by 386 an advantageous marriage and a provincial governorship seemed within his reach.

1.1 Conversion to Philosophy

Turning, as his *Confessions* allows us to do to the inner life where he sensed the grace of God, his first conversion while still in Carthage was to philosophy. Beyond our narrow usage, philosophy for Augustine and his contemporaries was a way of life. Its goal was to achieve something almost inaccessible – wisdom. This wisdom did not merely allow philosophers to know more. It allowed them to be in new way. It allowed serenity, inner freedom, and a consciousness of their place in a cosmos. In the *Confessions* he tells us how in the course of his syllabus as a student of literary style he came upon a book by Cicero called the *Hortensius*. This text contained an exhortation to philosophy that changed Augustine's life. For the object of philosophy is happiness or beatitude. Ethics is central to philosophy. In a passage from that Augustine later quoted ([On the Holy Trinity 14.19.26](#)), Cicero argues that if 'we have souls eternal and divine, then must we needs think, that the more these [souls] shall have always kept in their own proper course, *i.e.* in reason and in the desire of inquiry, and the less they shall have mixed and entangled themselves in the vices and errors of men, the more easy ascent and return they will have to heaven.'

1.2. Manichean Enlightenment

Augustine searched for this wisdom as a Christian but the crudity of the Latin Bible repelled him and his mother's church held no appeal for him. But a strong current of 'new' and 'spiritual' Christianity had always run against the literalism of the traditional church. One such group was particularly active among the half-Christian students and intelligentsia of Carthage where Augustine was converted a second time. They spoke of enlightenment as well as of Christ and they appealed to their hearers' reason. They were called Manichees after their founder Mani, who regarded himself a successor to Jesus Christ and who had been martyred in Persia in 276. In matters cosmological, the Manichees tended to be closer to Gnostic Christian than to Catholic Christians: they taught a radical dualism between two cosmic principles, in terms of which light and darkness continually confront each other. Their teaching offered an account of our origin, nature and destiny, and of our alienation in an oppressive universe. Evil cannot come from a good God. It came from an invasion of the 'Kingdom of Light' by a hostile evil force, equal in power, eternal, totally separate, the 'Kingdom of Darkness.' Illumination is a moment of self-perception in which we become aware that part of us belongs to the Kingdom of Light and can be set free to merge again into an untroubled,

original state of perfection. At [Confessions 5.10.18](#), he describes the appeal of this dichotomy in these terms: 'it still seemed to me that it was not we that sin, but that I know not what other nature sinned in us. And it gratified my pride to be free from blame and, after I had committed any fault, not to acknowledge that I had done any'. Augustine the Manichee could enjoy the very real consolation that, for all his intense ambition, his disquieting involvement with the mother of his son Adeodatus (a woman to whom he was not married), the pervasive sense of guilt that came so often to cloud his relations with his mother, at least a part of him remained unsoiled.

But Augustine began to have difficulties with the Manichean system. The astrological data which filled their myths was often wildly inaccurate. In the *Confessions* he relates his disillusion when he finally met the Manichee Faustus, the intellectual whom he had been promised would be able to answer all his questions. Faustus proved to be half-educated and incapable of doing more than reciting a complex set of slogans. Augustine had begun to feel that despite all their talk of liberation the Manichees had no room, in their religious language, for the more subtle processes of growth, and healing and renewal. It was the same on the intellectual level. He ran up against an esoteric 'secret' revelation that claimed to by-pass the demands and rewards of a classical philosopher's slow growth in wisdom. For a few years in Italy, from 382-386, Augustine was in the painful position having lost faith in Manicheism without finding faith in any other system. He lapsed into Ciceronian skepticism. Monica had followed him to Milan and pressed the claims of Christianity. Augustine could probably have held out against her will alone indefinitely. But because he was in public life and needed to network he encountered one of the most powerful men in Milan, the Catholic bishop Ambrose. He became a catechumen as a politic act of conformity. As another 'professional' he wanted to hear the distinctive oratory of Ambrose's sermons. But these sermons presented him with a sophisticated Christianity that avoided the literalism that the Manichees criticized. The Christian intelligentsia in Milan interpreted the Scriptures using the philosophical resources of the dominant contemporary philosophy, Platonism.

1.3 Among the Christian Crowd

The Platonism he discovered through these Christians and the *libri platonici* he read liberated him from the dualism of the Manichean system. Platonism conceived of evil, not a substance opposed but equivalent to good, but rather as a privation, something altogether lacking in real existence. Reality is good. Whatever exists is good in virtue of its very existence. 'Evil' is simply the absence of the good, as a shadow is simply the absence of the light. Evil is to be defined as a deprivation or deficiency, in a being that has become corrupted. This Platonic conception of evil changed the centre of gravity in Augustine's spiritual life. He was no longer identified with his God – his God became utterly transcendent.

More must be said about the disputed question of whether the conversion narrative Augustine presents in his *Confessions* is transparent to historical fact. But the external outline of the consequences of this encounter with Ambrose and the *libri platonici* is more straightforward. In 386 Augustine gave up his position and retired with family and friends to a villa in the countryside near Cassiciacum where he spent the winter of *otium*, learned leisure, writing philosophical dialogues with definite Christian undercurrents. At the Easter vigil service the next year he was baptized in Milan, by Ambrose. Renouncing his career and the possibility of marriage Augustine returned to Africa. Back in Thagaste he and his friends lived together in community, their lives now given to pray, study, and conversation. But two years later, on a visit to the coastal city of Hippo Regius to meet a potential new member of his community he found himself virtually conscripted into the priesthood by the local congregation. The elderly bishop died in 396 and Augustine succeeded him, exactly as those in Hippo who had conscripted him into the priesthood had intended. Conventional accounts present Augustine's career in terms of his writings and the controversies with other groups in which he was engaged. But his life was in fact dominated by his pastoral responsibilities. Outside a few great sees bishops were not administrators who delegated pastoral care to their priests. Most of his time was taken up in audiences with his clergy and people, and in adjudicating in their disputes. The real focus of his activity lay elsewhere still in the liturgy. The controversies were important because they threatened the unity of the community's worship.

Augustine was not alone in coming out of philosophical leisure to serve as a bishop. A comparison may be helpful. In 409, and also in Northern Africa, Synesius of Cyrene had similarly agreed to leave the retirement of a philosopher for the duties of a bishop. He announced in a public letter that he would be happy to preach myths in the pulpit if he was allowed to pursue truth in his study (Bregman 1982). Augustine's attitude was quite different. As soon as he became a priest he immersed himself in Scripture and, while a debate with Platonism is the subtext of almost all his writings, he presented his theology in response to pagans and to the interpretations of rival Christians as the most coherent reading of the plain sense of Scripture. He placed himself among the Christian crowd.

2. Works and Enemies

Augustine's prolific literary achievement and the energy revealed in it can only be compared with the extraordinary output of Origen. Augustine relates in his *Retractiones* (his review of all his writings composed at the end of his life) that by 427 he had already written 93 literary works and 232 books – and these figures do not include his many sermons and his numerous letters which were often very long. A recent estimate suggests that of his sermons 'to the people' we possess only 546 out of a possible 8000. Their style presents an immediate contrast with that of Origen. They reveal the poetry of his imagination as well as his training in the rhetorical techniques of persuasion.

2.1 Against the Manicheans

In controversy against the Manicheans, Augustine wrote works which seek to vindicate the Old Testament, which they found repugnant, exploring the relationship between faith and reason, clarifying the nature of evil as the absence of the good, and emphasizing human free-will against Manichean determinism.

2.2 Against the Donatists

Augustine also wrote against the Donatists, a schismatic group which represented the majority of African Christians. It bears the name of Donatus, bishop of Carthage, who lived some 80 years before Augustine. During that time, the North African churches were recovering from the last bitter wave of persecution begun in 303 by the emperors Galerius and Diocletian. After the persecution ceased, fierce recriminations began about those who had lapsed (or were alleged to have lapsed) in the midst of the persecutions. An active minority insisted that cooperation with the imperial authorities was tantamount to apostasy, that the taint of such apostasy was communicable through the sacraments of the church, and that anyone implicated in betraying the church needed to be rebaptized. The purity of the Church could not be compromised. This 'Donatist' group regarded the imperial church of Constantine as another compromise. Despite imperial opposition, the 'Party of Donatus' grew in Africa while the Catholic Church waned. In Hippo itself, by the 390s the larger church and more populous congregation belonged to the Donatists. A constant state of half repressed internecine warfare existed between the two communities. Eventually in 411 at an imperial conference in Carthage, Augustine invoked imperial force to compel the Donatists to enter the imperial Catholic Church. He also wrote against the Donatists to present a Catholic view of the Church and the sacraments. He countered their concern with the purity of the Church and with personal holiness by asserting that Christ is the author of all sacramental gifts and that Christ's grace is not impeded by human failings, however unworthy a minister might be. Sunshine is not dirtied when it falls upon mud.

2.3 Against the Pelagians

In 411, Augustine became aware of what has been described as another form of Christian elitism, that of Pelagius. Unlike the local controversy with the Donatists, Augustine's debate with Pelagius and his supporters was international. Pelagius had gained influence in Rome by espousing an uncompromisingly ascetic Christianity informed by the conviction that God has made us entirely capable of fulfilling his will. Before Augustine heard of Pelagius' teachings, Jerome had already begun writing against them. As for Augustine, he based his criticism of Pelagius' teachings on a straightforward liturgical argument. All parties to these debates accepted the practice of baptising infants and they all used the same rites to perform those baptisms – so it remained for Augustine merely to point out that Pelagius and his supporters were baptising infants 'for the remission of sins' even while they argued that infants are

sinless. It was following the logic of that sacrament, and consolidating earlier local traditions, that Augustine came to refine his understanding of the doctrine of original sin.

Pelagius moved frequently and while in Palestine a synod at Diopolis cleared him of heterodox teaching in 415. This verdict (which Pelagius seems to have secured by being economic with the truth in his testimonies) allowed Pelagius to claim that he was teaching the traditional faith of the Church. Thereafter, Augustine campaigned relentlessly, in writing, in synods, and through influence in Rome, eventually securing Pelagius condemnation by Pope Zosimus in 418. In response to Pelagius Augustine's teaching became ever sharper on the necessity of inward grace, given to the elect alone, to free the human will from captivity to sin. Some Italian bishops led by Julian of Eclanum dissented from the papal verdict, and for the rest of his life Augustine was engaged in an increasingly bitter polemical conflict with Julian, the most systematic defender of Pelagius. With their emphasis on the relation between the transmission of sin and sexual intercourse, and on human helplessness without the grace of predestination and of perseverance, these writings are Augustine's least palatable. Certain ascetic groups in Africa and southern France queried Augustine's teaching, since it seemed to them incompatible with human responsibility before God. Augustine replied to them, clarifying and restating his position, but after his death the controversy intensified. Since the time of the Reformations, this final debate has been misleadingly known as the 'Semi-Pelagian Controversy'. In recent times, most specialists of the literature, theology and history of that period avoid the term, not least because it wrongly suggests that differing from Augustine amounted to endorsing Pelagius.

2.4 The writings, with particular reference to the *Confessions*

Augustine's corpus of works extends far beyond the works that issued from these controversies: his sermons include full expositions of the psalms and the gospel and letters of John. His *De doctrina christiana* addresses questions of semiotics and biblical hermeneutics, and in *De trinitate* he explores how the three Persons who exist within the one essence are distinguished and subsist only in the relations, which constitute the inner life of the Godhead. Augustine finds images and vestiges of the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the inward life of his human image, in the mind's faculties of memory, intellect and will.

But Augustine's most celebrated work is his *Confessions* in 13 books. Beginning to understand the *Confessions* allows us to begin to understand his doctrine of grace. The text is in a sense an autobiography but Augustine communicates such a sense of personal involvement in the ideas he is handling that, it is perhaps possible to forget that it is an exceptionally difficult book. He makes sense of his experiences with as strictly theological analysis of what is significant, a theological analysis that determines what he chooses to tell us of his past. What he chooses to tell us is the story of his *affectus* – his 'heart' or 'feelings'; for example, on reading the *Hortensius* (3.4.8) of

which he says 'it changed my feeling' (*mutavit affectum meum*) or on parting from his mistress (5.15.25). We need to understand why.

He wrote the *Confessions* between 397 and 401. In 397 he wrote another work, *Various Problems for Simplicianus* whose argument offers a clue for understanding the *Confessions*. They are both books about grace, the liberating power of God in human lives, which is needed for deliverance from the tension Paul describes in Rom. 7:19: 'For the good that I would I do not, but the evil which I would not, that I do.' In his answer to the questions of the Milanese priest Simplicianus, Augustine came for the first time to see human beings as utterly dependent on God, even for their first initiative in believing in him. His reasoning explains why he gives such attention to the life of feeling in the *Confessions*. Our feelings escape our powers of self-control, as Augustine demonstrates in his account of the visit of his friend Alypius to see a gladiatorial combat (6.8.13). The feeling of 'delight' is the only possible source of action; nothing else can move the will. But it is just this vital capacity to engage one's feelings on a course of action, to take delight in it, that escapes our powers of self-determination.

Augustine provides exactly the theological analysis that determines what he chooses to tell us of his past ([*Confessions* 9.1.1](#)):

But You, O Lord, art good and merciful, and Your right hand had respect unto the profoundness of my death, and removed from the bottom of my heart that abyss of corruption. And this was the result, that I willed not to do what I willed, and willed to do what you willed. But where, during all those years, and out of what deep and secret retreat was my free will summoned forth in a moment...?

Without grace, another kind of love (*cupiditas*, not *caritas*) can direct our wills away from God. Remembering his theft of some pears as an adolescent, with its suggestion of the original sin, he remembers that 'It was foul and I loved it' (2.4.9). Christians must confess their need to be healed, and welcome dependence on a therapy beyond our control.

Turning to the question of the whether Augustine's narrative of his conversion is transparent to historical fact, examination of this question clarifies how his theology of grace determines what he chooses to tell us of his past. In Book 8, composed around 400, he describes his encounter with the grace of God in a garden in Milan some 14 years earlier. The conversion scene powerfully recapitulates the theological themes of Books 1-7 – the weight of sin upon the child of Adam, the weakness of the divided will, the absolute dependence of men and women on the freely given, inexplicable grace of God. The moment of dramatic reversal comes as Augustine reads the words of Rom. 13:13-14 (*Confessions* 8.12.21).

But when we turn back to Augustine's writings from the period immediately following his conversion however, to the works written at Cassiciacum in 386, we find a different voice. Paul is scarcely cited in these dialogues. Augustine reflects on the problem of evil but he seems to conceive of conversion quite differently; not as the

struggle of the will, and of sin and grace, but as an autonomous progress in Philosophy (*Contra Academicos* 2.2.5). The victory of the mind over the body will allow the rapt contemplation of the philosopher, as in the Platonic philosopher Plotinus' image of a sculptor releasing the inner beauty of a form from the stone as he completes the work. But in the experience of salvation that Augustine describes in his *Confessions* salvation comes only through a great storm, a loss of control, an experience of surrender. How do we explain this discrepancy?

Augustine's theology changes when he returns to Africa and so does his interpretation of Paul – and correspondingly of himself. He begins to study and interpret Paul, and especially *Romans*, against the Manichees in Africa who interpreted his epistles in support their dualistic and deterministic doctrine, and also against the Donatists. With the conceptual vocabulary he learnt from the epistles, Augustine pursued the problem of moral evil by in analysis of the dynamics of love and the interplay of grace and free will. He concludes that Paul teaches that it is not man's will but solely the unmerited gift of God's grace, which can correctly orient man's love to the divine. Augustine makes the same case exegetically in his response to Simplicianus and autobiographically in his *Confessions*, demonstrating through his description in Book 8 of his own conversion.

The *Confessions* were written by a Catholic bishop with a new understanding of grace who wanted to be the authoritative interpreter of Paul. He self-consciously presents his personal history as the model for his theology in the *Confessions* and interprets his personal history in the light of Paul's as he sees it in Acts 9, the account of Paul's own conversion which he takes as the key to his theology. They are both sinners inexplicably redeemed from their former lives by the unmerited gift of God's grace. So Augustine current position as bishop is the will of God and the teaching of Paul and Augustine are one. His account of his conversion narrative maximizes its theological and polemical value. But what actually happened, what he actually experienced and felt at the time of his conversion is not accessible to the historian.

3. A Christian everyman

It is clear however that in the 390s, the crucial decade in his development, Augustine lost the kind of optimism about human capacity which we've seen in the work of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. His account of the violent love of God breaking through in moral struggle and spiritual darkness presents a more tragic account of human experience. The peace and security of contemplation are postponed until the final resolution of all tensions, far beyond this life. Augustine lost the future he hoped for at his conversion. He realized that he would always feel incomplete in this present existence, and a pilgrim, looking for the peace which he came to speak of as the City of God. If education does not reliably sustain the ascent to God, and if the choice of God is hidden then the spiritual few who for the Platonists could approach God dwindles to One. Only by being joined to the one body of Christ can we hope for the indwelling presence of God. Augustine did not seek for himself an exclusive salvation. For Augustine, the journey to

salvation is made in a mighty company. On the anniversary of his episcopal consecration, he told his congregation (*Sermon* 340.1), 'What frightens me is what I am *for you* and what consoles me is what I am *with you*. For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian. The former is the name of a responsibility undertaken, the latter the name of grace; the former is danger, the latter is salvation.' The tension between advanced and simple Christians is simply absent. Augustine works against elitism.

Augustine was quick to see affinities in the Donatists' and the Pelagians' calls for perfection, and he diagnosed the roots of the two maladies in the same fundamental error: the impatient, pre-emptory anticipation here and now of the Church's eschatological purity. He rejected both versions of perfectionism with the passionate intensity of a man who had once come close to something like this perfectionism. He had rejected Manichean asceticism not only as an insult to created nature, but also because it implied too radical a dichotomy between the ordinary believer and the spiritual elite. As a young Catholic he had spoken with condescension of ordinary Catholics and even of uneducated clergy. Pastoral responsibility brought him a deepened sense of community with the half-educated, superstitious and sensual Christians of Hippo, and a poignant remorse for his pride. His answer to both Donatist and Pelagian perfectionism was the same. It was the answer he had learnt from the dissident Donatist theologian Tychonius. The Church on earth is a mixed body in which the holy rub shoulders with the wicked. The wheat and the tares, as Augustine repeatedly reminded the Donatists, must be allowed to co-exist until the end. The ecclesiology Augustine deployed against Donatism had been an attack on one kind of perfectionism. Pelagian perfectionism raised new problems and demanded new theological labours but the nature of his answer was already settled. In Christian perfectionism Augustine saw an insidious pride that ruptures community. He presents humility as the specifically Christian virtue.

'Purity' is not to be defined in the language of achievement or of avoidance but of single-minded self-exposure to God's pure truth. The holiness of the indwelling Spirit who causes Christ to become alive in us comes into us through a radical putting aside of self-reliance. We must learn to tell our own stories as believers in the mode of recognition of our weakness and witness to God's power to restore – *confessio*, acknowledgement, in the double sense of admitting failure and pointing to where help is to be had. There is a clear line joining Augustine's autobiographical 'confessions' to his responses to Donatism and Pelagianism. For Rowan Williams (2005: 50) what we see here is the beginning of a movement that will bear fruit in the Reformation era in some very clear ways. It is a move away from defining the integrity of the Church in terms of its visible achievements or the unbroken consistency of its practice and towards a definition in relation to the action of God within it.

4. The *City of God*

This is clear in the presentation of true Christian identity he presents in the 22 books of his *City of God*, the greatest work of Christian apologetic in antiquity. It was written in instalments between 413 and 427, and begun to seek to refute ‘cultured despisers’ who blamed Christian worship for violating the reciprocity between gods and man sustained by pagan sacrifice and thus provoking the catastrophe of the sack of Rome by the Goths in 410. He orchestrates his refutation of pagan cult and philosophy and his exposition of his own account of Christian belief with a tale of two cities, the City of God and the earthly city. He told his readers what a demoralized group needed to hear. He gave them a sense of identity. He told them where they belonged and to what they must be loyal. The two cities are created by two kinds of love. The City of God, the eschatological community of angels and men present in time and history, is entered through the door of humility. A man inspired by God would be able to see, behind all the confusion in the Church and the world, the terrible simplicity of the alternatives between which men had gravitated throughout their history. He presents the apostle John to his audience as one who realized this division in the spirit; as a human being he could only see an inseparable mixture, but what could not yet be seen as separate in space, he separated out with his mind. With the glance of his heart he saw just two peoples, the faithful and the faithless ([*City of God* 14.28](#)):

Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, ‘You are my glory, and the lifter up of mine head.’

The Texts

Two of the texts for this unit come from Augustine’s *Confessions*; the first, a passage from Book 2 describes Augustine’s terrifying discovery that ‘It was foul and I loved it’ in relation to an adolescent act of vandalism. The second is his famous account of the crisis of his conversion in Book 8. The theology of grace that informs his autobiography is presented in an extract from his response to questions from Simplicianus 1.2.21, and it also informs his account of the two cities in the last text, *City of God* 14.28.

Further Reading

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Questions for consideration

- How did reading 'the books of the Platonists' allow Augustine to become a Christian?
- Is the account of his conversion he offers in his *Confessions* transparent to historical fact?
- What does 'grace' mean for Augustine?
- How does he use the story of his own life to illustrate his doctrine of grace?
- What do his responses to both Donatist and Pelagian perfectionism have in common?
- What is the City of God?