

# **The Synthesis of Christianity, Neoplatonism, and Gnosticism in Augustine's Worldview**

## **Introduction**

In this article, we will explore the fascinating interaction and confluence between various philosophical and religious traditions in the context of Augustine's worldview. Augustine, a prominent figure in the Roman Empire during its decline, synthesized Christianity, Neoplatonism, and Gnosticism to address the challenges of his time. We will delve into Augustine's personal struggles, his attraction to Manichaeism, and the transformative power he found in the writings of Platonists and Platonists. Ultimately, Augustine's synthesis offers a profound understanding of the nature of reality, the pursuit of meaning, and the path towards personal and spiritual growth.

## **The Influence of Manichaeism**

Augustine's journey begins with his attraction to Manichaeism, a religion that incorporated Gnostic elements. Manichaeism promised to address Augustine's personal loss of agency and the increasing darkness in the world. The worldview of Manichaeism emphasized the existence of evil powers and structures, which resonated deeply with Augustine's experiences and observations of the world.

# **Augustine's Inner Conflict**

Augustine grappled with a profound inner conflict, particularly his addiction to sexual behavior. He suffered from self-loathing due to his loss of agency and sought a way to break free from his personal struggles while also addressing the evil he perceived in the world. Augustine's deep personal experiences and struggles played a significant role in shaping his philosophical and religious outlook.

## **Encounter with Latinas and Platonists**

As Augustine traveled and familiarized himself with philosophy, he encountered the works of Latinas and Platonists, which had a profound impact on him. In Latinas and Platonists, he found a different worldview, an alternative to the Manichaean perspective. Through reading their works, Augustine had a mystical experience, ascending through the levels of reality and consciousness. However, he struggled to sustain this higher state due to the gravitational pull of darkness within him.

## **The Role of Christianity in Augustine's Synthesis**

In a moment of despair, Augustine heard a child's voice urging him to pick up and read. He followed the advice and came across the writings of Paul in the Bible. Augustine found affinity with Paul's inner conflict and discovered a worldview that made sense of his struggles. He realized that Christianity could bring together the insights of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, providing healing and addressing the presence of evil in the world.

# **The Three Orders: Normative, Normological, and Narrative**

Augustine's synthesis harmonizes three fundamental aspects: the normative, the normological, and the narrative orders. Drawing from Platonists, Augustine embraced the normative order, which explains how individuals can move from what is less real and fragmented towards what is more real and integrated. He recognized that this movement is driven by a love for truth, goodness, and beauty.

Furthermore, Augustine incorporated the normological order, influenced by Aristotelian thought, which emphasizes the structured and coordinated movement towards fulfilling one's purpose. Augustine believed that everything in the world is purposefully moving to overcome evil and move towards goodness.

Lastly, Augustine integrated the narrative order from Christianity, which provides a grand story of history and God's love. This narrative order gives meaning and purpose to individual and collective existence, guiding human beings towards self-transcendence and the fulfillment of their potential.

## **The Power and Significance of Augustine's Synthesis**

Augustine's synthesis is not merely an intellectual endeavor but a comprehensive and transformative worldview. It offers a profound understanding of the nature of reality, the pursuit of meaning, and the path to personal and spiritual growth. By bringing together

science, spirituality, therapy, and existential exploration, Augustine's synthesis provides a rich and enduring vision for individuals seeking coherence, significance, and purpose in life.

## **The Relevance Today and Unanswered Questions**

The significance of Augustine's synthesis transcends historical contexts. It speaks to our innate human desire for coherence, significance, and purpose. Augustine's worldview, deeply rooted in the axial revolution, can still offer profound insights and guidance in our contemporary world.

However, we must ask ourselves why we have not fully embraced this powerful synthesis. Are we forever bereft without the mythology of Gnosticism, the axial mythology, or the Christian narrative? The forthcoming arguments will address these questions, suggesting that the response to our longing for meaning is not lost but attainable through a thoughtful reconsideration and reinterpretation of these traditions.

In conclusion, Augustine's synthesis of Christianity, Neoplatonism, and Gnosticism represents a profound culmination of historical development. It offers a vision that integrates science, spirituality, therapy, and existential exploration, providing individuals with a comprehensive framework for understanding reality, pursuing meaning, and achieving personal and spiritual growth.

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## **The Unraveling of the Sacred**

# **Canopy: Crisis and the Shift in Worldview**

## **Introduction**

In this article, we will explore the ongoing series entitled "Awakening from the Meaning Crisis" and delve into the reasons behind its title. We are only halfway through the series, and thus far, we have been examining the problem and gaining an understanding of the meaning crisis and its wisdom. However, we still need to address the question of why it all falls apart and where it leaves us. To do so, we must grasp the genealogy of the crisis and the process of loss. In this episode, we focus on Augustine's worldview and the traumatic loss experienced with the collapse of the Roman Empire. We also explore the subsequent division in Christianity, the rise of Aristotelianism, and the emergence of Thomas Aquinas as a pivotal figure attempting to reconcile the Christian worldview with the newly rediscovered Aristotle.

## **The Traumatic Loss and the Power of Augustine's Heritage**

With the collapse of the Roman Empire, a profound loss occurs, including the disappearance of cities, literacy, trade, and the standard of living. This loss leaves a lasting impact, and the heritage bestowed by Augustine serves as a powerful refuge during this tumultuous period. Augustine's worldview provides solace and meaning to people amidst the chaos and despair.

# **The Unraveling of the Sacred Canopy**

However, cracks begin to appear in the sacred canopy that once sheltered and provided meaning. In 1054, the division between the East and West within Christianity, known as the Great Schism, weakens the unity and influence of Christianity. The Western version of Christianity starts to deviate from its deeper Neoplatonic and mystical roots, becoming more influenced by Aristotelian thought. The shift in cultural, historical, and socio-economic contexts further exacerbates the fragmentation within Christianity.

## **The Shift in Reading and Knowing**

A significant shift occurs in the psycho-technological practice of reading. Prior to this shift, reading was primarily done aloud, communally, and with recitation, fostering a deeply embodied and participatory experience. However, a new way of reading silently emerges, focusing on individual coherence within language rather than transformative engagement with the text. This shift in reading coincides with the rediscovery of Aristotle's works, which poses challenges to the Christian worldview due to its explanatory power and different perspective on reality.

## **Thomas Aquinas: Reconciling Aristotle and Christianity**

Thomas Aquinas emerges as a pivotal figure in addressing the crisis. He faces the challenge of reconciling the Christian worldview with the new scientific knowledge derived from Aristotle's works. Aquinas introduces a distinction between the natural world and the supernatural world. The natural world can be studied through

reason and science, while the supernatural world is accessible only through faith. This formulation attempts to salvage both the Christian worldview and the newfound scientific understanding. However, it unintentionally leads to a separation between reason and spirituality, science and faith, and the loss of the supernatural world's livability.

## **The Unintended Consequences and the Threat to the Axial World Myth**

As reason and faith are pulled apart, and the supernatural world becomes less viable and real to individuals, the entire grammar of the axial world myth, which provided meaning, wisdom, and self-transcendence, becomes threatened. The divorce between science and spirituality, reason and love, leaves us questioning the validity and coherence of the worldview that has shaped our understanding of reality. The consequences of this unraveling are explored further in subsequent episodes.

## **Conclusion**

The unfolding of the meaning crisis reveals the unraveling of the sacred canopy that once provided shelter and meaning to individuals. Augustine's heritage serves as a powerful refuge, but external and internal factors lead to the division within Christianity and the emergence of Aristotelianism. Thomas Aquinas attempts to reconcile the Christian worldview with the newly rediscovered Aristotle, but unintended consequences arise. The separation of reason and faith, science and spirituality, poses a threat to the axial world myth.