Introduction to the History of Christianity

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The African Pilgrim

> We speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. (1 Cor. 2:7)

One summer's evening in the year 386 a man sat in a garden in Milan. From Eden to Gethsemane, gardens had been the settings for some of the greatest of spiritual dramas. Now once again the scene was set for the climax and resolution of another, but this time intensely personal, conflict. Having asked his friends to leave him in solitude, this man, in his early thirties, his body wracked with emotions and tears pouring from his eyes, seemed to be on the verge of what we would now call a nervous breakdown. What had brought him to this place in such a condition? And why was this small personal drama to be of such significance not only for early Christianity but also for the future history of the Latin West?

The Restless Heart

Thagaste was a small provincial town in Roman north Africa, now called Souk Ahras and in modern Algeria. About 200 miles from the Mediterranean, it was on the southern fringes of the fertile belt whose produce helped to feed the great city of Rome. Here in the mid-fourth century a minor pagan landowner, Patricius, married a Christian wife, Monica, and subsequently produced three children, two boys and a girl. One of these sons, Aurelius Augustinus, born in 354, was clearly a boy of some intellectual promise. Educated in Thagaste itself, and subsequently in the somewhat more prominent nearby town of Madauros, at the age of fifteen this academic progress was temporarily halted for about a year while his father sought for the funds to continue it in the far more prestigious, but expensive, Carthage. During these months of relative idleness the boy had his first serious encounter with a garden. As part of a gang of youths he stole pears from the orchard of one of his father's neighbours. This adolescent exploit was later to cause the mature man much spiritual questioning; he saw it as a parable of original sin, his theft of the inedible pears a minor repetition of the stolen fruit of paradise. But eventually the greatest landowner in Thagaste, Romanianus, supplemented his father's meagre means, and in 370 at the age of sixteen he at last set out for Carthage, the great port and regional capital of north Africa, the only city in the West that could even begin to rival the magnificence of Rome or Alexandria.

Here over the next few years he was to make his first lifelong friendships, engage in his first sexual exploits culminating in the taking of a concubine and the birth of a son, Adeodatus, to discover Cicero, and lose one religious faith and find another. Technically a catechumen, he had almost been baptized when his life seemed to be in danger from a childhood disease, and he had continued to attend the first part of the Christian Eucharist. His reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*, however, both turned his mind to a more serious pursuit of philosophy and reawakened his religious instincts. But, as he returned to reading the Christian scriptures, his profound disappointment with their poor style in comparison to the great classical authors, especially in the abysmal Latin translations then available to him, led to disillusionment with the faith of his mother. In 373 at the age of nineteen he experienced his first religious conversion: to Manichaeism. He was to remain a Hearer for nine years. The claims of the Manichees that their beliefs were founded on reason, their repudiation of the Jewish scriptures, and their dualistic explanation of the problem of evil, seemed to present better answers than Christianity to many of his pressing problems.

By 376 he had completed his formal education and was now himself a teacher in Carthage. His continuing religious questionings, however, were leading to his first doubts about Manichaeism and its ability to answer not only his questions but also those of his closest friends Alypius and Nebridius. This fresh disillusionment was compounded when the famous Manichaean Bishop, Faustus, visited the city and was quite unable to satisfy these young intellectuals when confronted by their probing examination. Carthage in any case was proving to be too restricted a stage for the fulfilment of their ambitions, and so in 382 they set sail for Rome and wider horizons. Here in Italy he would find the patrons he needed among the wealthiest aristocrats of the Empire. One of these, the prominent pagan senator, Symmachus, arranged for him to be appointed as professor of rhetoric in the city of Milan, now effectively the main centre of government in the western half of the Empire. He moved there in the autumn of 384, eventually to be joined by Alypius, Nebridius, his concubine and son, and his mother, Monica.

Milan was not only the residence of the Emperor, however; it was also the episcopal city of Ambrose. Never before had the African encountered a Christian like him. From a wealthy aristocratic family, he had been elected Bishop against his wishes in 373 while still an unbaptized provincial governor. Our young African went to the basilica to hear him preach, initially more out of secular interest, to experience a master of oratory, rather than for the religious content of the sermons. But what he heard had a profound effect on him. Here was a man of lofty social status, with an intellect and education to match his own, who for the first time presented to him a spiritual interpretation of the Jewish scriptures which not only satisfied him on an intellectual level but also offered an effective refutation of their dismissal by the Manichaeans. Ambrose was also a thinker and orator who began to show him how the philosophy of the Platonists could be used in defence of his mother's faith. Under Ambrose's influence he returned again to a study of the great followers of Plato, men like Plotinus and Porphyry. In comparison to their sophisticated religious thought the Manichaeans again appeared crude and inferior; God and evil began to seem far more sophisticated concepts than he had previously conceived. Once again he felt his imagination swept up into something far greater, just as he had done all those years before when he had first read Cicero's *Hortensius*.

Now, at the beginning of 386, he was on the one hand withdrawing more and more into himself in an intense and emotional course of study; on the other hand the world and ambition were calling. He put aside his lover of sixteen years and became formally engaged to a girl of only twelve. Respectable marriage was essential if he was to find promotion in imperial service. However, sexual renunciation was not yet for him, and he quickly took another, if temporary, partner.

But this absorption in philosophy was not his only intellectual pursuit. A prominent Christian priest, Simplicianus, eventually to succeed Ambrose as Bishop of Milan, introduced him afresh to the Christian scriptures, which he now read in the light of Platonist philosophy; and indeed in the person of Jesus the *Logos* made man, the ultimate goal and fulfilment of philosophy. Just like Justin Martyr more than two centuries earlier, he was now being led ineluctably towards an acknowledgement of Christ as the final end in which Hellenistic as well as Jewish thought ultimately culminated. Simplicianus also told him of others who had taken this route before him, especially the great intellectual Marius Victorinus, the translator of Plotinus and the leading light of the Platonism of his day. In old age he too had read the scriptures and had become convinced of the truth of Christianity, had humbly gone through the preparation of a catechumen and had been baptized.

His friend, Alypius, was also coming to a similar conclusion, if by a somewhat different route. One day a fellow African had introduced him to

Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, and told him that such a monastic community actually existed just outside Milan, and further reported to him that others who had abandoned the prospect of bright worldly careers had joined another community in Trier. The friends were shaken by the concept of these men, learned and unlettered alike, taking heaven by storm. His intellect now convinced, still our African resisted. By the summer of 386 the two parts of him, his intellect and his will, were at war with each other. Like rising waters slowly building behind a great dam, everything told him that a final abandonment of his will to Christ was the only answer. That dam must break, but still it held, though under intense and increasing pressure. The psychological strain of this inner conflict led to even his physical health deteriorating, and he began to experience repeated difficulty with his breathing. Would he ever find release from this growing torment?

And so we come to the garden in Milan. Here, sitting under a fig tree that again echoed not only the distant tree of Eden, but also the pear orchard of his youth as well, he sat in an agony of mind and body, nearing the point of complete breakdown, and seriously contemplating suicide as the only possible release. And then, suddenly, as if floating on the air itself, he heard a voice singing, the sweet, innocent voice of a child, associated by everyone in the ancient world with the pronouncements of oracles. He heard this angelic voice gently chanting: 'Pick up and read, pick up and read.' The random opening of a book, perhaps Virgil for a Latin pagan, the Bible for a Christian, and reading the first sentence that the eye fell on was a common practice in antiquity for finding miraculous words that would answer or resolve a problem. Perhaps this was what he was now meant to do. He recalled how Antony himself had resolved upon the ascetic life after hearing the words of Christ in the Gospel, seemingly addressed precisely to himself.

Quickly he rose, brushed away his tears, and walked over to where Alypius was sitting. Here he had left a copy of the letters of Paul. He opened the book, and looked. Immediately his eye fell on two verses from the letter to the Romans: 'let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires' (Rom. 13:13–14).

At the reading of those words the dam finally burst and the waters flowed into his soul and all doubts were washed away, and he had his first glimpse of the great truth of the Christian God, that our hearts are restless till they rest in him. Then Alypius followed his example and he too picked up the book and read the next verse: 'Welcome those who are weak in faith' (Rom. 14:1) and saw these words as directed to himself. In those few minutes their world had changed for ever. Alypius and the man we know as St Augustine had

completed the first stage of their Christian pilgrimage. Now they could turn to the next.

That began with baptism. In the dark early hours of Easter Sunday, 387, the two friends and Adeodatus removed their clothes and walked down into the baptismal pool attached to the great basilica in Milan to hear Ambrose invoke the Holy Trinity over them. As they moved from death with Christ into his new life, they were anointed with oil and clothed in the symbolic purity of white garments. Then they were led with the other newly baptized Christians into the basilica itself to experience the eucharistic feast for the first time. Augustine would never forget the experience of being greeted by a shimmering sea of lighted candles held in the hands of the assembled faithful, as he too moved from darkness to light, nor the inexpressible beauty of the chanted hymns, a musical practice copied from the Greek East and introduced to Milan by Ambrose himself. By now all thoughts of respectable marriage or brilliant public career had been abandoned, and by September, 388, Augustine and his circle of friends were back in Africa, initially settling in Thagaste to begin the first experiment in monastic living on African soil.

His mother had already died before he had left Italy. By 391 his son, Adeodatus, had followed her, as had his friend, Nebridius. Emotional bonds tying him to his past were snapping, which made the new ascetic life of his little community all the more appealing. But by now the site of this experiment had shifted to the port of Hippo Regius. Here a preliminary foray to discuss the possibility of founding a community there took a surprising turn when the assembly at the Sunday Eucharist pushed Augustine forward and demanded his immediate ordination. Like Ambrose and others before him, the Christians of Hippo knew a prestigious catch when they saw one! This was now the price he had to pay for a small house and another garden in which to re-found his community. By 395 he had been elected the unwilling assistant to the elderly bishop, and within a year had succeeded him upon the latter's death. Here Augustine was to remain as Bishop of Hippo for the rest of his life.

We know so much about his life because he now composed what was to become his most read work, the *Confessions*. This told the story of his early life culminating in his conversion to Christianity. At the heart of this book was the idea that his own experiences were a paradigm of what was possible for the whole human race (*Confessions* II, iii, 5), and that people find God only by truly finding themselves first. Or as Augustine was to express it in one of his sermons: 'Our whole business in this life is to heal the heart's eye by which God is seen' (Document 10).[1]

Yet the *Confessions* is not a straightforward autobiography. It is unique in the literature of antiquity, both as a masterpiece of artistry and style that helped confound any lingering pagan doubts about the ability of Christianity to

nurture great literature, and at the same time as a totally new and original conception. It was in part a description of that renewal and reformation in the new creation of Christ which Paul had first introduced and which Augustine encapsulated vividly in one of his letters: 'Our Maker is our Re-maker'.[2] But the *Confessions* also had some classical influences as well, most notably in the philosophical soliloquies such as that of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, or in the epic poem the *Aeneiad* of Virgil telling the story of the journey of Aeneas from the ruins of Troy to the foundation of Rome. Augustine's journey, however, was a spiritual one, and his agonizing over his separation from God was at a great emotional distance from philosophers who thought that reason alone could bring them near to the divine.[3] Augustine was rather the prodigal son returning to a loving father, and his book owed as much to the *Lives* of the Christian ascetics as it did to pagan authors for its literary precedents. It is also a vast, extended prayer in which the reader, as it were, overhears a Christian soul in dialogue with his maker. In that sense it is more a work of theology than autobiography. Indeed, it can be read on so many levels that these multiple readings can give it a very modern feel. Its themes of memory, redeemed human nature and the grace of God working on individuals have found echoes in a wide variety of later works, from spiritual autobiographies like those of Teresa of Avila in the sixteenth century or John Henry Newman in the nineteenth, to novels such as that by Marcel Proust or *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh. Not surprisingly it has recently been described as 'one of the most influential books of western European culture'.[4]

Controversies

In his own time, however, Augustine's reputation was largely built on his lengthy career as an apologist for orthodox and catholic Christianity, forged in a series of disputes with opponents both outside and within the Christian fold. One of the first of these was the contest with the proponents of the faith of his first conversion, the Manichees. It was their explanation for the existence of evil, their claims to be a religion of reason, and their rejection of the Jewish scriptures which had initially attracted Augustine. What he gradually came to see was that their analysis not only of divinity but also of humanity was defective: far too simplistic and unable to offer explanations for the complexities and conflicts he felt within himself. 'The Manichees had avoided the tensions of growth on all levels . . . With all their talk of "setting free", the Manichees had no room, in their religious language, for the more subtle processes of growth – for "healing", for "renewal".'[5] It was a static faith in stark contrast to the potential dynamism of Christianity, one that left Augustine feeling trapped: 'I had already lost hope of being able to advance higher in that false

doctrine' he wrote later of the Manichees in the *Confessions*, his own potential for spiritual progress thwarted (*Confessions* V, x, 18). As he was to discover, their boast of reason dissolved into a series of complex myths, and their criticisms of the Jewish scriptures were easily answered by Ambrose with the help of Platonism and the application of typology.

At the heart of the problem, however, lay their account of creation and their explanation for evil. Their dualism, the idea that created matter was inherently evil because the product of darkness, effectively absolved the God of goodness and light of responsibility. But, as Augustine discovered, this did not really accord with reality as he had found it; creation contained much within it which was manifestly good. Again it was the Platonists who began to lead Augustine towards a solution. For them, evil was effectively non-being. From this he went on to argue that Christianity's analysis was easily superior to the Manichaean one. In its origin all creation was good because made by the one supreme God of goodness. Evil had arisen not as a force in its own right, but as a corruption of what was originally good, and the ultimate cause of evil was sin, and the responsibility for sin rested with human beings, not with God. Evil thus had no existence of its own; it is literally nothing.

Yet of their own free will human beings have chosen this path of corruption, and the only way back is to recognize that we are utterly dependent on the grace of God, even for that primary initiative of believing in him at all. Here Paul took over from the Platonists. What the grace of Christ offered Augustine was precisely that growth, that dynamic re-creation of his nature that he found so frustratingly lacking in the Manichees. And in a series of public disputations and in his many writings, Augustine presented them with a stream of counter arguments based on a much more sophisticated analysis of both God and humanity.[6]

A far more potent foe within his north African church was represented by the Donatists, however. By Augustine's day they had become entrenched, and in some areas were probably in a majority. One of the reasons for his election as priest and then Bishop of Hippo was that the non-Donatist assembly in the city felt intimidated by a dominant Donatist presence, and they looked to Augustine to use his intellectual skills to combat this. Both churches laid claim to the title 'catholic', and so the debates in which Augustine was to be heavily engaged have become fundamental for the history of the struggle to achieve the defining characteristics of that concept.

The Donatists presented one potential model of catholicity. In this they claimed to be the legitimate heirs of Tertullian and Cyprian, and thus appeared to have the advantage of appealing to local traditions and feelings. Their notion of catholicity was defined in terms of purity and exclusivity. They made no distinction between the present, historical Church, and the future

eschatological one that would follow the *parousia*. Among other things, this view depended crucially on how certain passages of the New Testament were to be interpreted. 'His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire' John the Baptist was reported as foretelling of the Messiah (Matt. 3:12). The problem was to decide when this 'gathering' was to happen. For the Donatists it was a present reality; they had already been formed into a 'gathered' Church. This idea originated in their rejection of those bishops and other clergy who had compromised with the imperial authorities during the Diocletian persecution, and was extended to those 'contaminated' by succeeding them or collaborating with them, including those outside Africa. Thus their concept of catholicity extended to the sacraments celebrated by these two groups; sacraments too had to be 'pure' and uncontaminated by the sin of apostasy. A fullness of purity in clergy, people and sacraments was thus the defining mark of catholicity for the Donatists.

Augustine saw in such arguments that same essential flaw that he had previously isolated in the Manichaeans. Donatism also left no room for growth, either individually or collectively. Its ideas led once again to a static view of the faith, deriving from its essentially defensive posture. Donatism 'was immobilized by anxiety to preserve its identity'.[7] What was the Church? Was it a refuge, an alternative to the larger and impure society around it, or a vital part of that society seeking to transform and redeem it from the inside? Augustine took the latter view, and saw the Church as the vehicle through which humanity could strive to recover its lost sense of unity consequent upon the Fall. As such, the Church was inevitably going to be a mixture of saints and sinners; the wheat and the chaff had yet to be separated. In any case, as Augustine was frequently to observe, not all Donatists were that holy or morally pure anyway.

The Church on earth was never going to be a monolithic structure, but was rather in constant dynamic tension with itself and the world. For Augustine the imperative of catholicity that flowed from this was growth and expansion, both within the individual and in the wider community. People strove for moral purity aided by the grace of Christ, and the Church ever sought new members for itself. The Donatist church was locked into the past and the present; Augustine's Church was one forever looking to the future. The logic of the Donatist argument was that catholicity would also be limited in space as well as time, confined to its African homeland. Augustine argued that that confounded the very command of Jesus to his followers to 'make disciples of all nations' (Matt. 28:19); catholicity by its very nature was universal in the sense of being international and not the unique preserve of one people or region of the world. In his own words: 'The untroubled globe of the world

judges those men not to be good, who separate themselves from the whole world, in a particular part of the world.'[8]

And thus it also followed that if the Church was morally mixed, the validity and efficacy of its sacraments could not rest on the subjective purity of those administering them. Sacraments depended not upon the holiness of human beings, but upon that of their originator, Jesus himself, the only person without sin, who sanctifies the sacraments through his ministers. Thus the validity of the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, and the ordination of those celebrating them, rested instead upon the objective holiness of Christ. Once given, they could never be removed; baptism or ordination remained valid whatever the precise 'purity' of the priest or bishop administering them.

It was one thing, however, to challenge the Donatists on the intellectual level, quite another to combat them on the ground. By the late fourth century they had long been a powerful and established alternative to the official, imperially approved Church in north Africa. Augustine preached sermons against them not only in Hippo but also in Carthage and other cities, he issued a stream of writings, and engaged in public debate with their bishops, culminating in a great conference held in Carthage in 411, attended by 284 Donatist bishops and 286 of their opponents. The problem, however, was not so much winning arguments as inducing Donatists to return to the fold. As they were technically schismatics it was impossible to apply the imperial laws against heresy to them until an Edict of 405 equated schism with heresy. The crucial questions, however, were how far the imperial authorities should become involved in any process of persuasion or coercion, and what form or degree of coercion should be adopted. For many years Augustine was deeply reluctant to use even the mildest of physical force against the Donatists. However, in the years after 405 he became convinced that mild coercion was not only morally permissible, but also appeared to work empirically in the sense of persuading Donatists to abandon their church for his. Theologically he justified this on the grounds that humanity's fallen state required restraint, and that biblical passages such as the one about compelling people to come in also seemed to condone some level of physical inducement such as fines or other economic sanctions (Luke 14:23). What he would never agree to, however, was the use of either torture or capital punishment. But his attitude, however mild in the context of his age, has not endeared him to later generations, and he has sometimes been seen as the 'father' of the medieval Inquisition, and selective quotations from his works were used as a justification for the torture and execution of religious opponents during the Reformation. What is now clear is that such accusations, or out-of-context employment of his ideas, are clearly anachronistic, and would undoubtedly have horrified him.[9]

His combat with the Donatists secured Augustine's reputation as a theologian and controversialist within north Africa; what was to expand that into international recognition was the controversy that was to occupy much of the last years of his life, that with the Pelagians. But here his legacy is even more mixed than that resulting from the Donatist conflict. The issues at stake again raised fundamental questions about orthodoxy and catholicity, but this time centred on the moral condition of humanity, the degree to which our wills have been affected by original sin, and the consequent need for divine grace. Any reading of the *Confessions* makes it clear that Augustine viewed grace as the essential element in the healing process needed to begin to restore humanity to a right relationship with God. What did Augustine mean by this grace? As he conceived it, grace was 'a supernatural aid personally granted to the Christian through the essential and exclusive mediation of Christ'.[10] This was a totally free and unmerited gift; as Augustine himself wrote: 'The grace of God would in no way be grace if it were not in every way purely a gift.'[11]

The British theologian, Pelagius, had severe doubts about this line of argument. For him, human nature was nowhere near so corrupted and unable to fend for itself as he assumed Augustine to be implying. Genesis had described a human nature originally good in its essence; but clearly humanity's moral imperfections and failures could not be denied. Pelagius effectively argued that each human being was born into the same primal innocence as Adam, but that over time each individual was constricted by the weight of past habits and the corruption of society. Baptism restored the freedom of moral action and removed the necessity to follow the example of Adam. Thus grace was a useful *aid* in an individual's moral progress, not the essential originator of it and accompaniment to it.[12] Augustine on the other hand argued that Adam's sin was far more fundamental for the human condition. Where Pelagius saw Adam as providing his descendants with a bad example to follow, Augustine conceived of original sin as an inherited disease passed down the generations; in the graphic words of John Henry Newman in the nineteenth century, 'the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity' from which no human beings can free themselves.[13] For Augustine, the implication of the Pelagian argument was that we can attain moral perfection largely through our own efforts: 'If God has made you man, and if you make yourself righteous, you are doing better than God has done!' retorted Augustine in one of his sermons.[14]

In Augustine's view, the initiative always lay with God, a God who 'makes us righteous not through our own righteousness, but through his, so that our true righteousness is that which comes to us from him'.[15] True freedom was not the state taken for granted so lightly by Pelagius, but only the final end of a long process; baptism put you on the road to convalescence, it did not cure you. 'Men choose because they love; but Augustine had been certain for some

twenty years, that they could not, of themselves, choose to love. The vital capacity to unite feeling and knowledge comes from an area outside man's powers of self-determination.' Or in Augustine's own words: 'From a depth that we do not see, comes everything that you can see.'[16] This thing that we cannot see, but can experience, is grace which can 'lift our being up to the Being of God, because it can lift our love'.[17]

So far, so good. But further problems arise when considering Augustine's doctrine of grace. To what extent is humanity free to resist the gracious initiatives of God? If individuals are not able to choose to reject God's advances, then what is left of human free will? To this Augustine then posed a counter question: what is free will for? Is the possession of free will the same as being free? By choosing evil, humanity has effectively rejected God's gift of free will and it can itself only be recovered through the gracious action of God, for 'if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:36). For Augustine, the ultimate liberty of the saints is to lose the freedom to sin. But in so arguing he remained clear that grace did not override human free will; humanity remained free to accept or refuse God's grace, but ultimately cannot defeat God's ends by so choosing.[18]

This leads on to the further question: what are God's ends? What is the purpose and ultimate end of creation, above all of the creation of humanity? What does God will for humanity? Here we reach one of the most fiercely contested of Augustine's ideas, that of predestination. Briefly, this asserts that God has selected, or elected, only certain individuals for ultimate salvation, endowing them with the gift of saving grace. As Peter Brown has commented, this was a concept well suited to its time and place. Its emergence could clearly be interpreted in the light of the exclusive nature of north African Christianity going back at least to Tertullian, and ironically seemed to echo the basic impulse of the Donatists in this respect. And it also clearly spoke to the context of the early fifth century, a time of barbarian invasion and imperial disintegration in the West, where people would look for a sense of refuge, security and survival in a rapidly changing world. In this interpretation Brown presents perhaps one of the most favourable modern treatments of the origins of Augustine's concept of this doctrine.[19]

Other commentators are much more critical. Serge Lancel, for instance, sees the doctrine emerging as an extreme reaction on the part of Augustine to the ideas of the prominent Pelagian, Julian of Eclanum. And with it, he argues, Augustine placed himself 'on the frontiers of heresy'.[20] Gerald Bonner sees a paradox between Augustine's concepts of divine love and divine predestination, one that he frankly admits he is unable to reconcile. As he remarks, few modern theologians would maintain Augustine's concept of predestination in its full rigour.[21] Bonner and John Burnaby are also in agreement in arguing

that Augustine was too much influenced by another historical context, that of ancient notions of justice, punishment and retribution as practised by the secular legal authorities.[22] And several commentators have noted that there remained a fundamental scriptural stumbling-block to Augustine's concept of predestination.

In the first letter to Timothy, God is described as a saviour 'who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim. 2:4). This idea of a divine desire for *universal* salvation seemed to contradict Augustine's more pessimistic view of an elect only receiving the gift of saving grace, and even in his own day he was heavily criticized in these terms by John Cassian and other monastic writers from Gaul. Some modern authorities remain as convinced as Cassian that Augustine never succeeded in defending his views adequately in the light of this biblical passage.[23] But at the same time Gerald Bonner makes it clear that there is a distinction between this Augustinian doctrine and that of the Church; predestination, as understood by Augustine, never became the official teaching of the Latin Church of his day, nor of the Middle Ages, but remained no more than the opinion of a distinguished theologian.[24]

A further distinction has to be drawn, however, between Augustine's concept of predestination and that of the sixteenth-century Protestant theologian, John Calvin. Technically, Calvin is supralapsarian in asserting that God's decree of election, and by implication damnation, was made *before* Adam's fall, while Augustine is infralapsarian, in that the decree is a *consequence* of the Fall which God foresaw but did not compel. In addition, Calvin was to stress the total and complete corruption of human nature as a result of the Fall, while Augustine had defended the more limited extent of the disaster, humanity in his view retaining something of the divine likeness in which it had originally been created. For Calvin, goodness had died in humanity with Adam; for Augustine, it was wounded but capable of convalescence.[25] Although at first sight these distinctions may appear somewhat trivial, the significance and implications are in fact far reaching and clearly set a gulf between the two theologians.

Two Loves

For centuries, educated Romans had quoted the famous lines from Virgil's epic poem the *Aeneid* reflecting the belief in the eternal destiny of their great city and Empire:

> To them no bounds of empire I assign,
> Nor term of years to their immortal line.[26]

As we have already seen, in 248 the Empire had celebrated the millennium of Rome's foundation, again seeming to reinforce this everlasting destiny. Even when, in the fourth century, that Empire had shifted its religious allegiance to Christianity, Eusebius had, in a sense, done no more than reinterpret the old idea. He saw that destiny itself now subsumed into the larger picture of an earthly Empire reflecting the eternal kingdom of God himself. Perhaps the high-watermark of this concept of the eternal Christian Empire came in the reign of Theodosius I from 379 to 395. During these years paganism was finally and definitively outlawed, temples were destroyed or secularized into cultural monuments, the pagan revolt in reaction to these measures quashed, and orthodox Christianity proclaimed as the only official religion of the Empire. To many, even to Augustine himself, it seemed that the future of their Christian world looked bright.

But Theodosius had come to power in the wake of a disaster, the humiliating defeat of a great Roman army at Adrianople, not at the hands of the military forces of another great Empire, but by the barbarian Goths. Their subsequent pacification by Theodosius seemed to have reversed this catastrophe. But barbarian pressure on the Empire's frontiers had been building for generations, and Adrianople can now be seen rather as the harbinger of further disasters to come. More and more barbarian groups were being settled inside the Empire, partly to offer protection to them from other barbarian peoples pressing them from the east, and partly to supplement a declining population in the Empire itself and so provide the legions with desperately needed troops. As the ethnic composition of the imperial army gradually shifted in favour of the barbarians, so more of their leaders attained high rank in that army. By the early fifth century the writing was on the wall for those with eyes to read it. Many of the western provinces of the Empire were now effectively at the mercy of barbarian tribes whether external or internal, and the situation was rapidly deteriorating from year to year.

Then, finally, the unthinkable happened. In 410 the barbarian king, Alaric, at the head of a coalition of tribes supposedly in the service of the Empire, besieged and then broke into the eternal city of Rome itself, sacking and ravaging it and its inhabitants. Following that, his army moved south down the Italian peninsula driving further floods of refugees before it. The first ones to cross the sea and arrive in the relative safety of north Africa brought news that could scarcely be comprehended. It is almost impossible for us now to appreciate fully the sense of psychological trauma induced by these events. There is nothing in our more recent historical experience comparable to it; the fall of Singapore to the Japanese in 1942 undoubtedly damaged the presumption of British invincibility in the Far East, and the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 heralded the end of Soviet domination in Eastern Europe. But

these events are but pale and distant echoes of the catastrophe of 410. Rome was the symbolic heart of an Empire and culture that had lasted not for decades or generations but which had endured for a millennium. The fact that it was no longer the political capital of the Empire was not the issue; it was the living, vital heart of a whole world that, until 410, had seemed eternal and inviolable. Something sacred to all Romans, pagan or Christian, had now been violated, and that by those very barbarians who Rome had successfully kept at bay for centuries.

Why had this happened? For many of the remaining pagans, the answer seemed clear. So long as the gods of Rome had protected their city, she had been secure. Their abandonment in favour of the alien religion of Christianity had directly led to this, the greatest of all disasters imaginable. Only with a return to the worship of the gods could it be repaired.

Augustine shared with his fellow Romans that initial sense of shock when the news first reached him in Hippo. That other great Christian intellectual, Jerome (*c.* 345–420), had written of his own reaction: 'If Rome can perish, what can be safe?'[27] A few weeks after the sack, Augustine told his shaken congregation: 'The world is dying, the world is growing old, the world is overcome with weakness, it has the gasping breath of old age'.[28] But his analysis of the reasons for this calamity differed from the pagan one, and he believed there was an answer to Jerome's question. Rome's sack was a punishment for the sins of humanity; and in another sermon preached in its wake he compared humans to olives pressed to make oil, but with the spirit of humanity now turned to pure oil in this pressing. Even in the midst of disaster, he found reason for hope. 'Do not lose heart brethren, there will be an end to every earthly kingdom.'[29]

In these revolutionary words lay the kernel of a great idea that had been brewing inside him for some years. The sack of Rome merely confirmed that growing disillusionment he had been increasingly feeling for the Theodosian concept of Christian Empire. In 412 he sat down to write what was to grow over the following fourteen years into 22 books that we collectively know as *The City of God*. Here Augustine not only answered the pagan critics of Christianity, but more significantly also presented a vast panorama, a vision of an alternative to the Eusebian concept of the relationship of the heavenly and earthly realms. For the Christian, argued Augustine, ultimate citizenship did not reside in any earthly state, even Rome itself; the destiny of humanity lay far beyond this, in the truly eternal citizenship of the kingdom of heaven. Our lives on earth are but a temporary existence in which we are never really at home, but aliens passing through, pilgrims in a foreign land. The only eternal city is the city of God himself.

On one level there is, however, little that seems particularly original in

Augustine's thesis. The very title *The City of God* was itself taken from a theme that appears in a number of the Psalms (Ps. 46, 48 and 87), and is repeated again in the New Testament, especially in the book of Revelation (e.g. Rev. 3:12, 21:2, 21:10), and at a number of other points (e.g. Heb. 12:22; Gal. 4:24–6; Phil. 3:20). This concept of Christians as aliens with respect to earthly states was one also found in a number of early Christian writers; Tertullian, for instance, describing a Christian as 'an alien in this world and a citizen of the city on high – Jerusalem', a concept also repeated by Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Hilary of Poitiers (*c.* 315–68), Jerome and Ambrose.[30] In addition, while we have seen that there was a Christian tradition of interpreting the Empire in a positive light even before the conversion of Constantine, always alongside that was also a continuing counter tradition of seeing it in a very different light. This began again in Revelation with the presumed identification of a persecuting Rome with the beast of chapter 13, or the harlot of chapter 17. This view also had its later proponents, such as Hippolytus, who interpreted the Empire as a satanic imitation of the universal and eternal kingdom of Christ.[31] Indeed, Augustine's very use of the terminology of the two cities probably came from a renegade Donatist, Tyconius, a strange individual who broke with his former Donatist allies but never joined their opponents.[32]

However, *The City of God* is far more than just a re-presentation of old ideas. Its breadth, detail and sense of vision, all informed by the urgent necessity of responding to the events of 410 and the escalating collapse of an entire world, lift *The City of God* onto an altogether more elevated plane. Never before had a Christian writer scrutinized the historical records of both Judaism and Rome in such critical detail, and used them to construct and justify a vast thematic interpretation of the human spiritual and moral condition. *The City of God* goes beyond any supposed philosophies of history or politics to explore the fundamental human conditions upon which such philosophies themselves ultimately founder in their failure to recognize humanity's ultimate destiny. For at the heart of his concept, and lying behind the terminology of the two cities itself, Augustine identified two contrasting dispositions in humanity, which he characterized as two loves; 'self-love reaching the point of contempt of God . . . the love of God carried as far as contempt of self' (*The City of God*, XIV, 28). For him, the whole of history, sacred or secular, and the construction of all political systems, took their starting points from, and were the ineluctable developments of, these two primary loves (Document 11).

Augustine identifies the origins of this fractured humanity as commencing at the very inception of both Jewish and Roman history. For him, it is no accident that both begin with acts of fratricide. In chapter 4 of Genesis, Cain is described as murdering his brother, Abel, and then, significantly for Augustine, as founding the first earthly city (*The City of God*, XV, 1). Later, he sees

this initial crime reflected in the murder of Remus by Romulus, and the subsequent foundation of the city of Rome by the latter (*The City of God*, XV, 5). For him this new city of Rome was but a further manifestation of the great city of Babylon and the Empire of Assyria (*The City of God*, XVI, 17; XVIII, 22). Thus at a stroke Augustine challenges the widely held beliefs in the eternal and unique destiny of Rome and its Empire. History is dynamic and God is its author. Rome, like all other empires or states, has had its failures, military defeats and catastrophes; the sack of 410 was thus placed within a broader historical context, and Christians clearly absolved from the blame for its misfortunes.[33]

Augustine's answer to Jerome's question about where safety and peace are to be found was simple. Anyone looking for these in the ever-changing and impermanent fortunes of earthly states he calls a fool, for:

> such is the instability of human affairs that no people has ever been allowed such a degree of tranquillity as to remove all dread of hostile attacks on their life in this world. That place, then, which is promised as a dwelling of such peace and security is eternal, and reserved for eternal beings, in 'the mother, the Jerusalem which is free' (Gal. 4:26) . . . It is in the longing for this reward that we must lead devout lives, guided by faith, during this troublesome pilgrimage. (*The City of God*, XVII, 13)

And here Augustine enfolds one of the central themes of the *Confessions*, the idea that the human heart will be for ever restless in this life on earth, into that of the *The City of God*, where the only rest is conceived as eternal, in the true city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem. On earth those true lovers of this eternal destiny will remain as aliens and pilgrims in a foreign land.

From his protracted conflict with the Donatists emerged other ideas that are also further developed in the *The City of God*. One of those was that the citizens of the earthly and heavenly cities are not clearly differentiated until the end of time and the final judgement. Augustine never identified the heavenly city with any earthly institution, not even the Church. 'In this situation, many reprobates are mingled in the Church with the good, and both sorts are collected as it were in the dragnet of the gospel; and in this world, as in a sea, both kinds swim without separation, enclosed in nets until the shore is reached' (*The City of God*, XVIII, 49). It is in this inevitable mixing that Augustine sees the origins of states and empires, in their reversal of the heavenly principles of love, unity and mutual tolerance: 'hence human society is generally divided against itself, and one part of it oppresses another, when it finds itself the stronger . . . The result has been . . . that some nations have been entrusted with empire, while others have been subdued to alien domination' (*The City*

of God, XVIII, 2). The one exception to this pattern of mixture, domination and subjection was the monastic life, where individuals could choose freely to associate with one another in a new type of community which sought to reverse these, and establish a rule based on love. But Augustine was also clear that while monastic communities might to some degree prefigure the heavenly city more than any other human institutions, they certainly did not constitute a viable model to be imitated, but rather their very existence discomforted conventional society by presenting a fundamental challenge to it.[34]

But this did not mean that the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem should stand aloof from the affairs of this world. However, it was equally clear that Augustine conceived the role of the secular state in much more limited terms than was usual in ancient society. Basically he saw the role of the state as one of minimizing social disorder through its laws and their agencies. Yet these in their turn had to be just, for if justice is removed from the state 'what are kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale?' (*The City of God*, IV, 4). The Christianity that Augustine envisaged was a fundamentally questioning, not to say revolutionary, force in that it rejected all forms of utopia based upon worldly hopes, and was quite clear that 'the quest for perfection and happiness through politics is doomed'.[35]

In this latter point *The City of God* represented a fundamental and final abandonment of a concept that went back at least to the writings of Plato, that the *polis*, the earthly city, was the place where humanity would find its happiness and fulfilment, an idea that had expanded from encompassing a single city to the whole Roman world. The concept of the Empire as a divinely instituted and blessed institution, whether by pagan divinities or the Christian God through his imperial vice-regent on earth, the Emperor, was replaced by the more limited and modern-sounding concept of states as purely human institutions which were, in religious terms, neutral. To the question of whether or not the Empire could be re-formed into the image of God and heaven on earth, Augustine's answer was clear; that reformation happened in the human heart, where the only true recreation into the image of God could happen.

This disengagement of the secular state from divinity in any form was to be one of Augustine's greatest legacies for the future of the West. It gave Latin Christianity an essential counterweight to the Eusebian conception of the divinely ordained Empire. However close the Latin Church came to identifying itself with the barbarian or feudal kingdoms that eventually succeeded the Roman Empire in the West, there always remained the warnings implicit in *The City of God*. In the 1140s, for instance, one Otto of Freising took up many of Augustine's themes and even entitled his universal history *The Two Cities*.[36]

As Augustine lay dying in 430, however, it seemed that his life's work was now going up in flames. Two years earlier a vast army of barbarian Vandals had crossed the straits of Gibraltar from Spain and entered north Africa. For so long secure from these hordes, now these last provinces too began to succumb to the ravages that had afflicted so much of the West for so many decades. Encountering little resistance as they marched and plundered their way eastwards, by 430 the city of Hippo itself was now besieged, and Augustine was to die literally with the barbarians at the gates. Yet his work was to survive. The great bulk of his writings were preserved from destruction as the Empire in the West disintegrated, culminating with the formal abdication of the last Emperor in 476. He was to emerge as not only one of the most revered thinkers in medieval Christendom, but was also to become one of the great inspirations of the Reformation through his influence on Martin Luther. Even today his voice remains strong; Pope Benedict XVI has acknowledged Augustine as his greatest teacher. In a real sense our world too changed with Augustine's in that garden in Milan.

Indeed, if we review the history of the last century with all the political, economic and social 'isms' that so attracted so many people, whether, at their most extreme, the lure of the promise of a thousand-year Reich, or the inevitability of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and then see the scale of the consequent misery, destruction and death that followed in their wake, can we say that Augustine does not have a message for our times across the sixteen centuries that separate him from us? His analysis of the restless human heart and the divided self, reflected in a divided humanity that flows from it, and his consequent assertion that our ultimate hope can never be fulfilled in this world, least of all by political ideologies and the states they create, remains a timeless one.

Suggested Further Reading

Augustine was one of the most prolific writers of the early Church, and a vast amount of that writing has survived into modern times, including dozens of substantial treatises, commentaries and other major works, along with hundreds of sermons and letters, some of which are themselves the length of minor works. Consequently we have only been able to concentrate on two of those major works, albeit probably the most widely read and influential, in this chapter.

An excellent introduction to both the life and thought of Augustine is provided by Henry Chadwick's *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2001). Originally published in the Oxford 'Past Masters' series, it has now been reprinted under this new title with an updated bibliography and the addition of some illustrations. It is written with great clarity and a simplicity that somewhat belies the massive learning behind it.

Also recently reissued is what has for many years been regarded as the standard biographical study of Augustine in English. Peter Brown's *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* was first published in 1967; the revised edition of 2000 published by Faber and

Faber wisely leaves the original text unamended, but adds an extensive epilogue which takes account of more recent specialist scholarship, and especially the discoveries in 1975 and 1990 respectively of previously unknown letters and sermons by Augustine. This is an elegantly written and scholarly life of Augustine, which deals both with his interior intellectual and spiritual development, and attempts to place them within the broader historical context of his times. Although not a study of his theology as such, it does make quite a few assumptions about the reader's prior theological knowledge.

More recently the French scholar Serge Lancel has produced an even more detailed study. First published in France in 1999, and subsequently in an English translation by Antonia Nevill for SCM Press in 2002 that is not only very clear but also at times quite lyrical, Lancel's *Augustine* does incorporate the newly discovered letters and sermons as well as the most up-to-date research in the main text. It complements rather than replaces Peter Brown's biography, however, partly by presenting a Gallic rather than Anglo-Saxon interpretation. It too deals with both Augustine's life and ideas in a broadly chronological order; the drawback with this is that because so many of Augustine's ideas overlap from work to work, it can lead to some repetition.

Among those studies dealing more specifically with Augustine's theology, the one by Gerald Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies* (Canterbury Press, third edition, 2002) has become something of a standard starting place since its first publication in 1963. It has stood the test of time well. Insightful and written with clarity when dealing with highly complex and sophisticated issues, it is largely constructed around extensive quotations from, and references to, the writings of Augustine himself. For those who have already familiarized themselves with the basic outline of Augustine's life from other sources, the initial biographical chapters could be safely skipped.

Perhaps the 'classic' English study of Augustine's thought, however, is by John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St Augustine* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1938). For obvious reasons somewhat dated in style, and written at a time when its author could assume a more extensive knowledge of Latin than now prevails, it is not only extraordinarily perceptive but also a surprisingly easy read. In the view of Henry Chadwick it remains the greatest intellectual biography of Augustine, but is not so overwhelmed by the eminence of its subject as to avoid criticism or disagreement where that is deemed appropriate by the author.

Of the two works by Augustine himself introduced in this chapter, there is an excellent modern translation of the *Confessions* published by the Oxford University Press in its 'World's Classics' series in 1991, beautifully accomplished by Henry Chadwick with an introduction and wealth of useful footnotes. There is also a good, short, modern commentary by Gillian Clark, *Augustine: The Confessions* (Bristol Phoenix Press, 2005). This contains a very useful up-to-date bibliography that goes beyond this one work in its scope. For *The City of God* there are two very good modern translations. The one by Henry Bettenson, originally published by Penguin in 1972, was reissued in 2003; and Cambridge University Press published an alternative by R. W. Dyson in 1999. There is also a commentary by Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford University Press, 1999) which contains a detailed book-by-book analysis with surrounding chapters of discussion. While excellent, it can prove a little dry to read, given its approach and level of detail.

Finally, R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine*, first published by Cambridge University Press in 1970 and reissued in 1988, is a brilliant study of Augustine's evolving views on the Roman Empire and the general relationship between the secular and the sacred. Heavily based on *The City of God*, there is again some almost inevitable repetition of ideas, and sometimes it does not translate Latin words and phrases; however, it traces the growth of Augustine's thoughts in this area quite thoroughly, and also argues for their continuing relevance.