

## Introduction to Church History

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### An Introduction to St Augustine of Hippo

(Not to be confused with St Augustine of Canterbury!)

**Dates:** 354 – 430. ie. All of his life was lived in the post-Constantinian world.

A key source for our knowledge of his life was his *Confessions*, which is a spiritual autobiography and one of the earliest examples of this genre. It takes the form of a long prayer to God.

**Key works:** Augustine was a prolific writer, with comfortably over a hundred surviving works. Of note are: *Confessions* (see above), *On the Trinity*, *City of God*, exegetical works, works against Pelagius and against the Donatists.

Augustine is a Christian Patristic author of the Western Church, so wrote in **Latin**.

### Brief Biography

Was born to a Christian mother (Monica) and a pagan father (Patricius) in Thagaste (in present-day Algeria). As a child, he was admitted as a Christian catechumen, but not baptised. He was educated in rhetoric – prepared for a career of public/civil responsibility. At university in Carthage, he abandoned his Christianity and took up **Manichaeism**.

**Manichaeism:** After the Persian teacher Mani (c. 216 – 276) – with roots in Zoroastrianism and Persian folk religion. It was a radically *dualistic* religion: evil exists because God's goodness is opposed by an entirely separate evil divine entity. The first human beings, Adam and Eve, were created by this evil spiritual entity. Human beings become a battleground between the forces of good and evil: we can either follow the good God, or be agents of evil forces – this is played out in both individual and global terms. As a newer religion than Christianity, Manichaeism took on various features of church organisation from Christianity.

It seems as though in his twenties, Augustine was an effective advocate for Manichaeism, winning a number of his peers over to the faith. After teaching rhetoric in Carthage, he moved from his native Africa to Rome in 383, during which he seems to have become disenchanted by the faith. His interest moved to **Neoplatonism**. During this period, he also took a **mistress** by whom he had a son.

**Neoplatonism:** a form of Platonism which emerged in the Christian Era (though not expressly Christian). Key thinkers: Plotinus (c. 205 – c. 270) and Porphyry (c. 233 – c. 309). Focus on the One (as an expression of Platonic monotheism) as the Source and End of all being. From the One derive all other beings through the Nous or Demiurge. The foundation of creation is Spiritual, which is then expressed in phenomenal terms. In human terms, these correspond first to the human soul and thence to the physical body. This is close enough to certain expressions of Christianity to make it 'not exactly incompatible with' a lot of patristic thought. It was no surprise that a number of neo-platonists were drawn to patristic Christianity, including Augustine, and that neoplatonism should exert an interpretative influence on Christian theological philosophy.

After just a year in Rome, Augustine moved to become the professor of rhetoric to the Imperial Court in Milan. Beforehand, however, under the influence of his mother, Augustine dismissed his mistress and their son.

While at Milan, he became influenced by its bishop, **Ambrose of Milan** (c. 340 – 397). Ambrose was an outstanding intellectual and it was Ambrose's intellectual approach, which allowed him to engage Augustine and others in philosophical discourse, together with Ambrose's use of **allegory** to interpret the Old Testament, which helped to turn Augustine back to Christianity. Augustine's intellectual defenses were beaten, but he prevaricated until, while in a garden in Milan, he overheard children chanting 'take up and read, take up and read'. He was studying Paul's epistle to the Romans, and so he 'took up and read' the passage before him, Romans 13:12 – 14: *The night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling or 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.*

Augustine was baptised by Ambrose in 387. He returned to Africa, to the family home in Hippo. In 391 he was ordained priest and quickly became famous for his preaching (remember, he was a teacher of rhetoric). In 395 he was made bishop and remained at Hippo until his death in 430.

## Key themes and Works

### *Writings against the Donatists*

See previous lecture on Persecution and the issue of schism in North Africa. The Donatists had split from the mainstream church over the issue of rebaptism of heretics and schismatics. From the Donatist point of view, the Holy Spirit only is found inside the true Church. Therefore, the rites and sacraments of heretical or schismatic 'churches' do not have any effect, as a heretical or schismatic bishop does not possess the gift of the Spirit required for a sacrament of baptism to be effective. Ironically, the Donatists 'split' on this issue from the practice of the wider Church.

The Donatists were particularly successful in Africa, because their practice of rebaptising schismatics and heretics conformed to the teaching of **Cyprian of Cathage** (see earlier lecture). Cyprian had stated 'outside the Church there is no salvation', and had commended rebaptism of heretics and schismatics. Cyprian was commended as a martyr by both Donatists and Catholics alike, so Augustine had to step carefully in arguing against a practice Cyprian himself had commended. Nevertheless, whatever Cyprian may have said, the wider Church outside Africa tended not to rebaptise those who had been baptised by schismatical groups and had a variable policy in regard to heretical baptism. Augustine, as bishop of the Catholic Church in Africa, needed to defend his position theologically whilst honouring the memory of Cyprian.

Augustine argued that sacraments (like baptism and the eucharist) had two parts: an inward (spiritual) part and an outward (visible) part – ie. the rite itself. It was possible to have the outward part, without possessing the inward benefits. In the case of a schismatic baptism, those baptised did genuinely get 'outwardly' baptised, but were not in possession of baptism's spiritual benefits (forgiveness of sins, new birth) because of the sin of schism in which the rite took part. For Augustine, the biggest sin of schismatics was the **failure to love**, in that they stood apart from the rest of the Church by separating themselves off from them. Since love is the 'first commandment' this was a serious sin, and the root problem in schismatic groups.

The second part of Augustine's argument was that sacraments work by virtue of Jesus' righteousness, not by the righteousness of the person administering the sacrament. But schismatics, by separating themselves from their brothers and sisters, also separated themselves from Christ himself. It was this which nullified the inward power of their sacraments, not merely that they were administered by 'the wrong franchise'.

The conclusion of Augustine's argument was that the answer to the problem was for the candidate to re-unite themselves to Christ by returning into fellowship with the rest of the Church. This re-established the love connection, and the inward benefits – which always relied on Christ's righteousness – made their baptism valid and effective inwardly as well as outwardly. Augustine had succeeded in providing a theological justification for the widespread practice of Catholic Christianity! However, this emphasis on love did not stop him later using the law to persecute Donatists in Africa, as bishop of the Empire-sponsored (Catholic) faith!

### ***Augustine versus Pelagius***

Pelagius was a Celtic priest, who was shocked by hearing a reading of Augustine's *Confessions*. Augustine was vehement in ascribing to grace (and grace alone) the reason for conversion. For Pelagius, this nullified any human responsibility for salvation, good works and the need to obey God. It is arguable that Pelagius' position was closer to the Church's liturgy than Augustine's more abstract theology of grace. As the debate between the two deepened, various polarities emerged:

- Pelagius believed that all humans are born innocent and have exercise of free will to choose God's will;
- Augustine believed that all humans are born sinful and their will is damaged by sin so they cannot choose God's will and be saved;
- Pelagius believed the journey to salvation involved an active doing of good works as part of the process towards becoming a Christian and resulting salvation (through baptism);
- Augustine believed the journey to salvation depended utterly on grace alone, and was totally a gift from God, without reference to any goodness within the convert;
- Pelagius believed that human beings had an active part to play over whether they received God's grace or not – ie. they could choose whether to be saved or not;
- Augustine believed that God had predestined a subset of humanity to be saved and to these, and these alone, he gave grace which led inevitably to their salvation through conversion and baptism; the rest of humanity had been elected by God not to be saved but to die as sinners

Along with the rest of the Church of the time, **both** Augustine and Pelagius regarded baptism as the principal channel to receiving Christ and salvation. However, since Augustine taught that even a new-born infant was a sinner in need of redemption, his teaching accelerated the take-up of **infant baptism** with a renewed sense of urgency and necessity, since unbaptised infants had no hope of salvation.

Why did Augustine believe even new-born infants were sinners in need of redemption, when they had not committed actual sin of their own? His answer is that at conception all human beings inherit the sin of Adam – **original sin** – from their parents and that this is passed on because no act of procreative sex (by the parents) is entirely free of the sin of **lust**. All humanity is, for Augustine, naturally a lump of sin – some scholars argue that this reflects a return to his earlier attitudes when he was a Manichaean.

### ***City of God***

This book was triggered by the sack of Rome by invading Visigoths. Sought to explain why the Christian Empire was less stable to collapse than the old Pagan empire had been. Augustine, in the book lays out an interpretation of all of history as a battle between the 'City of God' and the 'City

of Man'. He distinguishes between these two cities in present history as well as past: therefore, just because the Empire is now Christian does not imply that it is **equal** to the City of God. Sin can still cause the Empire to crumble, but the City of God will never crumble – it will triumph. This helps avoid a simplistic assumption that because an empire (or country) is ruled by a Christian, that that country will act any better or fare any better than a pagan empire or country. History, for Augustine, is a spiritual struggle, where the politics don't necessarily correspond to the spiritual world.

By implication, the present Church *as we can perceive it* (ie. the Visible Church) is not the City of God either, as it may contain within itself sinners and hypocrites. Only in the final, heavenly City, at the end of history will the saved and purified Church be equal to the City of God. This was important reassurance for Christians of the Western (Latin) Church in the midst of the crumbling Western Empire. The Eastern Empire did not fully collapse until the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Thus Augustine's work differentiated between the Visible and the Invisible Church, the Church Militant (on earth, still struggling) and the Church Triumphant (in heaven, victorious at the end of time).

### ***The Trinity***

We have seen in the previous session how the Councils struggled with terminology (Greek) in defining the nature of the Christian God as Trinity. Augustine's writing on the Trinity (*De Trinitate*) some time after the Council of Constantinople (381) marks a move away from the politics of the councils, with their proofs from salvation history, towards a more philosophical approach. Augustine's *De Trinitate* provides a fundamental way of understanding how God can be One and yet Three. He uses the Biblical assertion that God is **love** to describe, by way of analogy, how the different persons of the godhead can be one, yet relate in that oneness of love. But Augustine, in providing a justification for Trinitarian language, goes on to relate the doctrine to the need for reconciliation to God (and hence for the need for salvation) and also to provide a basis for understanding the nature of our humanity and hence to provide an interpretative framework for spiritual growth.

The work demonstrates the sophistication and power of Augustine as a philosopher, and provided that basis for philosophical theology in Western thought for centuries to come.