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**Course: FTH 400: Early Church History**  
**Date: April 8, 2001**

## **St. Augustine**

### The Main Components of His Thought

There are few theologians that have had the influence that St. Augustine of Hippo has had on the philosophical and theological development of the early church. Although not the first theologian in the western empire, he holds a preeminent place within Roman Catholicism. In providing his system of grace and sin, his theology of the Trinity, and his interpretation of secular political structure and the Church, Augustine would create an intellectual balance with his eastern Greek counterparts. In addition the impact of his system would later touch on politics and society, and in the Middle Ages would show its force in all aspects of societal structure. Thus we will plainly see how Augustine of Hippo has legitimately earned his title: Doctor of Grace.

### **Main Influences on His Thought**

- One can see within his thinking the influences of Manicheism, skepticism, Neoplatonism, and the influence of his own life experience. (Leff 34)
  - Manicheism confirmed his own inclination to follow his evil ways.
  - Skepticism taught him to distrust sensual knowledge, and to believe that all truth is within the spiritual realm.
  - Neoplatonism gave him the idea of *ideal forms*: truth of reality exists in ideal forms, which are contained within God. Therefore, to know the truth is to know God (although not directly). As such, only the soul can attain the truth. In addition, *being*, is from God, and essentially *is* God. Finally, evil is the privation of being.
- He sees creation as a unified whole, united by the Platonic hierarchical structure: each stage in creation is derived from a higher, more spiritual stage. (Bokenkotter 72).
- As such, the truth, for Augustine, lies in the spiritual realm, and consists of knowledge of the forms that dwell in God.
- The senses can give us some specific knowledge; however, because the senses cannot be trusted, this specific knowledge cannot lead us to general laws. On the other hand, even doubt can give us some definite interior knowledge. Thus Augustine shows his preference for the interior over the exterior. (Leff 39)
- Augustine was also strongly influenced by St. Paul, who “helped him realize that philosophy was not enough to overcome the moral contradiction of our nature; God alone incarnate in the flesh and revealed in the Scriptures could do so” (Bokenkotter 72).
- Thus he developed these ideals within a Christian context. For example, rather than seeing creation as eternally existing and a necessary emanation of the forms, Augustine views creation as a free act of the benevolent creator *from nothing*.
- Platonic forms are thus rooted in God, and are the result of God’s free action (Leff 40).
- Because the forms all dwell in God, as we come to know them and become intellectually aware of them, we come to know God.
- Faith and knowledge are intimately connected: we must believe that knowledge exists before we can know it (Leff 37).

- The key question then is bridging the gap between corporeal human existence and the divine.
- God's grace is a necessary ingredient: not only do we need it to have knowledge, but it is also only by God's grace that we will want to know and to believe. God's grace is therefore the bridge between creature and creator. "It is the means by which we may enter into association with God, become His adopted sons [sic], and follow His ways." (Leff 37)
- Augustine's idea of the soul is largely platonic, although with some differences.
  - The soul is not imprisoned in the body. The body is also good in that God created it.
  - The soul is the "active ruler of the body." Because it is superior to the body, the body does not act on the soul. Thus, the soul informs the body of its own state (this is how he explains the senses, rooting them to within the action of the soul).
  - The soul mirrors the divine nature through the three-part activity of *being*, *intelligence*, and *love*. Augustine will see this as a parallel to his idea of the Trinity.

### Grace and Sin

- Central to Augustine's thought is the belief that humanity is so depraved that it cannot attain knowledge of the truth (in other words, have faith and be saved) by its own efforts.
- He connected transmission of sin to the human reproductive process, which leads back to the sin of Adam. This is his understanding of original sin (Chadwick 232).
  - With this in mind, we should note that for Augustine, the sexual impulse always has an ingredient of concupiscence – this was in line with the general regard for virginity as being a higher state.
  - This also reinforced the belief in infant baptism.
  - His surety of human depravity was amply supported by his own experience, particularly his own sinful life and tendency toward evil.
- Grace is thus needed in order to heal humanity's fallen nature (Leff 37). We are thus incapable of doing any good without the aid of grace.
- Augustine still holds to a notion of free will. "Grace confers upon free will the added freedom of being able to give effect to its desires to do good" (Leff 37). Without grace, humanity cannot even desire the good. Thus grace has to do essentially everything to effect our salvation.
- Grace therefore must be irresistible (Chadwick 232). This leads to the idea of predestination: because all the action for salvation lies with God, God must have knowledge of who is saved.
- Yet, Augustine still maintains belief in human free will. He attempts to resolve this paradox thusly:
  - Free will's decision-making process is by in large determined by what objects motivate it towards one decision over another. God determines the objects. Thus "no freedom... will resist what He has planned, although it always keeps the power of going to perdition (Portaliè).<sup>1</sup>
- Another paradox lies between predestination and God's will to save all people. He attempts to resolve this paradox thusly:

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<sup>1</sup> Personally I am apprehensive about this attempt to resolve the paradox between free will and predestination. It seems to me like Augustine is actually redefining what free will is to fit into his system, and as such removing the power of free will *per se*.

- Predestination lies not in God's will to save but in his knowledge of who will wish to be saved. This God knows in eternity. In this sense God can save all people.
- Why then some are saved and others are not lies with God, and for us remains a mystery "O Mystery! O Altitude!" (De Spiritu et litterâ, xxxiv, n.60; Portaliè).<sup>2</sup>
- Baptism was, according to Augustine, the means through which God's saving grace was transferred. Thus he would hold that all the unbaptized, even infants, were damned.

### ***De Civitate Dei, the State and the Church***

- Within the context of his assertion of human sinful nature and God's grace, and in order to give a theological explanation for the fall of Rome, Augustine proposed his theory of history in the *City of God* (Chadwick 226).
  - History is the struggle between two cities:
    - The earthly material City of Man [sic], which is connected to humanity's material needs, to corruption and sin, and to societal hierarchy. It is destined to decay (as such, analogous to the Roman Empire).
    - The heavenly City of God, directed toward the Spiritual world, and to salvation (as described above). Only a Christian can attain the heavenly city (Leff 45).
  - These two cities currently run parallel histories, they overlap, and are at times difficult to discern; however history also progresses toward the full manifestation of the City of God, which will be fully established in the last judgment (Bokenkotter 75).
  - In the meantime, secular government and hierarchy serves the function of maintaining order and safeguarding property. It is seen as a result of humanity's fallen nature, but also a divinely ordained chastisement and remedy for sin. As such, secular authority was to be respected and obeyed, even though it is a result of sin (that is unless it commanded evil).
- The Church is not the city of God.
  - The Church too is tarnished by sin, while it awaits its eschatological cleansing.
  - It however remains holy; the sacraments do convey grace, even if the minister or recipient is lacking in some way. The Church remains God's instrument, dependent on his grace, not on the merit of its members.
  - Meanwhile, the Church is to serve the Kingdom/City of God, through its mission to "act as a sociological sign of God's love for the world (Bokenkotter 75).
- Influenced by his difficulties with the Donatists, and within the context of his theology of grace, Augustine developed a theological justification for persecution of non-Christians (Bokenkotter 74):
  - Due to their utter depravity, people are incapable of making the free choice for salvation until God prepares them through suffering and punishment.
  - In addition, humans because they are so depraved, often need to be motivated by fear.
  - Thus suppression of non-Catholics can be regarded as divinely ordained, for the purpose of their salvation.

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<sup>2</sup> Again, I remain unconvinced with this explanation, which doesn't explain why if God's grace is irresistible, it is not given to everyone.

### ***De Trinitate***

- Augustine formulated a revolutionary doctrine of the Trinity, which unlike its eastern counterparts, focused primarily on the *unity* of the divine persons, and secondarily on the uniqueness of their *hypostases*. This may have been motivated by a desire to eliminate any subordinationism or risk of Arianism from his understanding (Chadwick 235).
- His model proceeds as follows:
  - God can only be described as *Being*, or in negative terms. Beyond that, God is mystery (Leff 43).
  - He uses the psychological analogy to explain the Trinity: the human soul is comprised of memory (or mind), intelligence, and will, each of which is interdependent on the other, the latter two being expressions of the first, and the third being a response to the first two. These are analogous to God: the Father corresponds to mind, intelligence to divine reason which is the Son, and appetitive will to the divine love that is the Holy Spirit (Chadwick 236).
  - Also worth noting is that Augustine developed the ingenious idea of *relations* to describe the Trinity: the Father is Father in that he is Father of the Son, the Son is Son in that he is Son of the Father, the Spirit is Spirit in that he unites and magnifies the Father and the Son. This brilliant notion focuses on the interdependence of the Trinitarian persons. In addition, he is the first to call the Holy Spirit the love between the Father and the Son.
- Within this understanding we can see the idea of the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father *and the Son* emerging, i.e. the *Filioque*.
- Other theological points:
  - Creation – All creation is created simultaneously, so that everything that ever will exist already does. New things coming into being is explained in terms of latency: the seeds of that which will be already exist in some form, awaiting realization (Leff 43).
  - Sin – Sin is regarded as the privation of goodness/being. It is also located within human free will. Thus Augustine absolves God of creating evil, and at the same time fights against Manichean dualism.

### **Augustine's Influence**

- Augustine would shift the “center of dogmatic and theological development” from the East to the West (Portaliè), and would be *the* major influence on Western Roman Catholic theology up until the scholastics.
- Augustine's formulation of the Trinity would have an impact on the *Filioque* controversy with the Eastern Church (Chadwick 236).
- Some would suggest his negative view of sexuality would have a detrimental effect on puritanical and even masochistic forms of spirituality, and on the role of women in society.
- By defining the societal hierarchy as divinely ordained, Augustine contributed significantly to medieval political theory (Leff 46).
- In addition, Augustine provided “the only full treatise found in the history of the early Church on the right of the state to suppress non-Catholics – one that exercised tremendous influence on subsequent Church policy and provided a rationale for the medieval Inquisition (Bokenkotter 74).
- His focus on grace and predestination would have an influence on Protestantism, particularly Calvinism.

- The council of Orange would affirm most of Augustine's theology, particular on Original sin, the need for grace, and its transmission through baptism. It however would not affirm the idea of predestination to hell of non-baptized infants.
- He had a major intellectual influence on both medieval scholastics and mystics: Anselm, Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, Bernard, Hugh of St. Victor, and Tauler (Portaliè).

### Evaluation

- "The religious strength of the full Augustine doctrine lay in its overwhelming consciousness of human dependence, awe, and reverence before the majesty and sovereignty of our Maker" (Chadwick 234).
- Another positive point is that Augustine's theological outlook is rooted firmly within experience – thus his theology does not lose its relevance. "The importance of this attitude lay in the way it started with the real world and with man's [sic] actual state" (Leff 38). Doubtless this fact accounts for Augustine's popularity.
- It is clear, at least to me, that his theological formulation was strongly motivated in reaction to Donatism (in his inclusion of sin within the Church) and Pelagianism (in his insistence on Grace).
- Augustine's strongly negative picture of humanity seems in part to be motivated by his own sense of guilt and his own inferiority complex. I tend to wonder about the objectivity of this picture as a result, and whether it takes full account of God's mercy and creation's goodness.
- Augustine himself affirmed that the body is good as created by God. This aspect however does seem to get lost within his strong focus on the soul. This and his negative view of sexuality tends to make me wonder whether Augustine may have been too dualistic in his approach (and not incarnational enough), and whether this displays, as Julian of Eclanum suggested, a tendency towards Manicheism that Augustine was not able to completely shed upon his conversion (Chadwick 233).
- Augustine clearly had an influence on the structure of medieval society, which insisted on hierarchy as a means of preserving unity. One should be prepared to look beyond this picture to attainment of the goal: the City of God. In relying on Augustine's statement of the need for hierarchy in the light of humanity's fallen nature, I would tend to wonder if the medieval world fell into a state of complacency, losing sight of the goal that Augustine himself propounded.
- Augustine's justification for the persecution of non-Christians is somewhat precarious.
- I have also expressed apprehension about his resolution of the paradoxes created by predestination in footnotes 1 and 2.
- Augustine brilliantly establishes the idea of *relations* within his Trinitarian framework, and even proposes the Holy Spirit as the love between the Father and the Son. Then he mysteriously drops this model, and picks up with his unbiblical and confusing psychological analogy. Why he did this continues to make me wonder.

Taken positively or negatively, Augustine's influence on the medieval world and on the western Church are clear. This influence can be traced even to this day, where many contemporary theological and social questions and debates can be traced back to its root within the theological systems of St. Augustine of Hippo.

## References

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