

Augustine of Hippo: Theologian and Mystic

Part I: Four popular Roman philosophies attracted Augustine, but he ultimately moved beyond them. Yet he used each in different ways to help express his Christian theology and mystical insights.

Stoicism: A Greek philosophy based on “abstract reason” and *logos*, “the universal law of reality.” This law is the principle according to which all things move and, therefore, the creative divine power. It is both a physical power and moral power. Because of man’s ability to reason, a wise man orders his life in harmony with *logos*. Civil law must be based upon this law and political leaders are required to follow reason, without passion, in carrying out the law. And, an education harmonious with *logos* can potentially give every human being universal citizenship, which serves as an equalizer for people of all nations. But the majority of people are fools driven by passion or fall somewhere in-between and must be guided or prevented from acting contrary to the law.

Manichaeism: A movement named after its “prophet” Mani. Dualistic in character, it is a mix between Persian Zoroastrianism and the philosophy of Plato. Its dualism made it possible to explain sin and evil rationally. For Mani, the evil principle is as positive as the principle of good. This was not only rational but of existential concern. The elements of good were captured by the principle of evil. Truth lies in the universal struggle between the good and the bad. Only those who lived a strict ascetic life could resist the influence of evil. Manichaeism was Christianity’s main competitor for a long time and still influences how many people understand what Christianity teaches.

Skepticism: As Roman civilization began to collapse; many people fell into doubt about every possible truth. Only probable statements are possible; no certainty is possible. (It was akin to Fatalism, the belief that everything happens by pure chance.) Augustine overcame his skepticism through the Greek Pythagorean idea of the cosmos; that is, principles of form and harmony as expressed in mathematics, the unchanging structure of the cosmos.

Neoplatonism: A fusion of Platonism and Judaism, its most influential philosopher was Plotinus of Alexandria. He taught that creation “emanated” from the Absolute—God; Good; Spirit—and gradually lost its spiritual-goodness, becoming material-evilness, and finally ending as nothing; that is, the complete absence of Good. Therefore, humans must return to the Absolute, “the flight of the alone to the Alone,” by means of asceticism, separating one’s (spiritual) soul from the (material) body with the goal of reaching a mystical union with the Absolute.

Part II: The Life of Augustine.

Aurelius Augustine was born in 354 in the small town of Tagaste near the North African city of Hippo. Although a Berber, his family had been granted Roman citizenship. His father was at first a pagan but received baptism before his death in 371. His mother,

Monica, was a godly Christian, who probably had the deepest religious influence on her son. Yet, Augustine did not become a Christian until later in life. Augustine studied in Carthage to be a lawyer where he was impressed by the Stoic writings of Cicero. Like many of his fellow students, he engaged in several sexual encounters before he lived with a young woman but did not marry her, probably because she wasn't a Roman citizen. They had a son whom they named Adeodatus (meaning "given by God"). As he questioned his inability to control his sexual desires, which sullied Stoic rational morality, he came under the influence of Manichaeism.

When he finished his studies, he went to Rome with his concubine and their son to seek employment as a teacher. There he realized that truth could not be found in theoretical reason and fell into Skepticism. But he was soon attracted to the philosophy of Neoplatonism, finding a new confidence in the certainty of the Absolute. It also caused him to grasp that evil is not a positive force, but the absence of Good. His search for a teaching position took him to Milan where he came under the influence of Bishop Ambrose. Augustine went to hear him more because of his eloquence as a speaker than to hear the gospel. However, Ambrose's powerful sermons began to make an impression on him. Furthermore, his mother came to live with him. She persuaded him to send his concubine away and to become engaged to a girl who was not yet old enough to marry. So, he took another concubine.

A government official who was visiting him told him about two army officers who had been so impressed by reading Athanasius' *Life of St. Anthony* that they gave up their army careers to become monks. Augustine was deeply humbled when he heard this. As he reflected on this while in his house garden, feeling more deeply than ever his sinfulness, he suddenly heard a voice saying, "Take and read, take and read." He saw the Letters of Paul lying on a table, opened it, and read the first words that met his eye: "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires."

Augustine's conversion dates from the moment of this reading, in the summer of 386. He immediately told his mother, who was filled with joy. He put away his concubine, and he requested Ambrose to instruct him for baptism, which he received in the cathedral of Milan, along with Adeodatus. In that same year his mother died. Adeodatus died the following year at the age of eighteen.

Augustine returned to Africa. There he embarked upon the service of the Church and advanced rapidly in it. In 389 he was ordained a presbyter, in 395 assistant bishop of Hippo and a year later he was elected full bishop. He lived a simple life in a monastery which he established. During the next thirty-five years he was recognized as the most significant theologian of the western Church. His writings have continued to influence Christian theology to this day.

Augustine died in Hippo on August 28, 430, while the city was surrounded by the barbarian Vandals. A few months later, the city was utterly destroyed. Only the cathedral and Augustine's library escaped total destruction.

Part III: The theology of Augustine is preserved in five books that he dictated to a scribe. The whole of Augustine's theology and mystical visions were deeply influenced by Neoplatonism. It is in this light he read the Bible, understood sin and grace, and viewed the Christian life. This affected his views on matters such as marriage, celibacy, asceticism, and monasticism. However, we must not be overcritical of this. Every generation of Christians is more or less deeply influenced by perspectives of life and reality held by the leading thinkers of the day. This is unavoidable if the church is to speak to the world in which it lives.

1. "*Confessions*"

In *Confessions* Augustine examines his spiritual life and makes confession of his sins, but only in order to rightly confess God's praise.

Moving from childhood to manhood, from doubt to belief, he recalls small experiences and expresses his deepest thoughts. Augustine the man, the son, the friend, the philosopher and theologian, sees his own life and the lives of all men in the light of God. It is one of the great books of Christian devotion.

2. "*City of God*"

City of God sets forth Augustine's view of history and its meaning. It was occasioned by the sack of Rome, the world's greatest city, in 410 by Alaric's Goths. This led many pagans to attribute the calamity to the Christian religion. *City of God* addresses the charges and misrepresentations made by its assailants.

Augustine acknowledges the greatness of Rome and the strength of Roman character that produced the city and its empire. He states that God gave Rome the power to maintain temporal peace by keeping order while administering just and equitable laws. However, when it failed to do this, it lost that legitimate power. Moreover, even the greatest of cities and nations must pass away. There is no human magnificence or achievement that lasts forever. Therefore, we must look to the City of God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down from heaven. That city is now being built. It is the Kingdom of God, the Church of Christ, and it will endure forever. It exists as a city within the city of the world. Even in the church, not all are citizens of heaven. One day the city of evil, the kingdoms of man, will wholly disappear, and the City of God will shine in beauty forever.

3. "*On the Trinity*"

Augustine developed the final form of the western teaching regarding the Trinity. He taught the full equality of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is no earlier, or later, no superior, or inferior, in the Trinity. The Son is fully God, and his distinct character is to be eternally begotten by the Father. The Holy Spirit is fully God, and his distinctive character is to proceed from both the Father and the Son. This is officially expressed in the Athanasian Creed (erroneously so called, since it wasn't written by Athanasius): "The Father is made of none; neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made nor created, but begotten. The

Holy Spirit is of the Father and the Son; neither made, nor created, but proceeding. ...[T]he whole three persons are co-eternal and co-equal. So that in all things...the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshiped.”

The words “and the Son” have been perpetuated in the Latin expression *filioque*. This teaching has been accepted in the western church but not in the eastern. (This was more a political decision that ultimately divided the Eastern Orthodox church from the Roman Catholic church than a theological one.)

4. “*Against the Donatists*”

The Donatists were orthodox in their teachings but did not recognize the Catholic Church. They claimed that sacraments administered by an unworthy priest or by one who was ordained in an unworthy manner were thereby invalidated.

Augustine taught that the power of the sacrament does not lie in the power of the priest but in the character of the church. The Catholic Church is holy because it is apostolic; its bishops are successors of the apostles. Thus, it is also united and universal. There is no other church, and outside this church there is no salvation. For these reasons, its sacraments are holy and valid regardless of the character of the administering priest or minister. But Augustine, thereby, did not approve of an immoral or unspiritual ministry.

5. “*Against the Pelagians*”

Pelagius, probably an Irish monk living in Rome, taught that God gave to every man the *possibility* to live a sinless life. God has given man the *will* to live such a life. Why then did men sin? They sin because of evil examples. Sin is hence not a human condition from which men must be set free; it consists of separate evil actions. Man is by nature good, but his will has been weakened by yielding to evil example. Man is assisted in strengthening his good will in two ways. God gives us the law, and he has sent Christ to be our example.

For Augustine this doctrine contradicted both the teaching of Scripture and his own religious experience. Therefore, he replied to Pelagius: Sin does not consist of evil actions but in the evil nature inherited from Adam. Evil actions are caused by an evil nature. All men, without exception, are born with this evil nature. However, it is not part of our created being; we received it after creation. Therefore, it can be removed and our original good nature can be restored to us. This restoration is the result of God’s grace. Grace is God’s work in the heart of men that enables them to do good. Without it we cannot obey the law or believe the gospel of Christ. Belief in Christ unites us to him, adds love to faith, and makes possible a life of obedience to God. The grace of God is irresistible in those who are predestined to eternal life; it is not given to those who are predestined to eternal death.

The church accepted Augustine’s teaching on sin and grace in its general outlines. It condemned Pelagianism at a synod in Carthage in 416. A century later (in 529) a synod held in Orange, Gaul, further confirmed his teaching. It condemned,

however, his teaching of predestination to eternal death and gave a prominence to good works that Augustine would not have approved. This became the position of the Roman Church of the Middle Ages.

Part IV: Augustine has left us with no systematic treatise on mysticism. His mystical insights are scattered throughout his writings. Some of his deepest thoughts are found in his *Confessions*, his sermons and commentaries on the Psalms, the Gospel and First Letter of John, and his treatise *On the Trinity*. His mystical thought is theocentric, not Christocentric—it is the passion for the Absolute first experienced in his love for philosophy that grew into the certainty and joy of God’s loving presence, whose utter transcendence remains ultimately incommunicable. Augustine was a master at using the language of paradox to express the essentially inexpressible. These excerpts from his works give us a sense of this mystical contemplation:

How shall I pray to God—my God, my Lord? It seems strange to ask him to “come into my heart.” After all, he is the God who made heaven and earth, and the Bible tells me that even they cannot contain him. So, how can my poor, small heart invite him in?

And yet we also read that you are present in all things, Lord. Without you, nothing that is can exist. You “fill all things:” every place, high or low; heaven and the grave; light and darkness; the “uttermost parts of the sea.” Nothing exists without you. Nothing can exclude you.

Surely that means that even I cannot exclude you; that if you are not in me, nor I in you, I should not exist.

Which leaves two mysteries: how can the infinite God of heaven and earth enter my heart? And, can I ask him in, *who is already there?*

Of course, heaven and earth cannot *contain* you, the infinite One, any more than my small heart can. There can be no limits, no boundaries to confine one who “fills everything.” But to say you are everywhere, Lord, is not to say that everywhere has all of you. We say a bucket is “full” of water, but it contains only a drop compared with rivers and lakes and oceans. Though you fill all things, you do not necessarily give them all of yourself.

But I can pray truly that my heart, where you already have a foothold, may receive more and more of you, until one day the whole of me will be filled with the whole of you.

The process of life demands that some things pass away to make way for others. The leaves fall, to be replaced, next spring, by new buds. Generations succeed generations. Last year’s dying fruit is this year’s seed. It is the pattern of creation.

But God never departs. He is outside this process. In him is a rest that cannot be disturbed, a love that lasts forever.

So let me build my eternal home in him; and fill it with all good things I have received from him. How can I lose if I commit everything to a Lover who cannot fail me?

And his love will bring life to all dying parts of my soul. It will cure my moral frailty. It will take away that instability and indecision that has ruined my life.

And what is more, the weak side of my life—the desires and passions that draw me to passing loves and concerns of earth—will be transformed. I shall not lose my capacity to feel, to love, to enjoy, but they will serve God, not men, and bring me to salvation, not ruin.

Sources: Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, Eerdmans, 1976; Ursula King, *Christian Mystics*, HiddenSpring, 2001; Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, Harper & Row, 1968; David Winter, *100 Days in the Arena*, Harold Shaw, 1977.