Augustine's Poisoned Chalice

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Augustine (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-augustine/548.aspx) was born into a late-fourth-century world that was ostensibly Christian. At least, that's what Emperor Constantine (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-constantine/165.aspx) had called it at the beginning of the century, and apart from a short reversion to paganism under Julian the Apostate (360–363), the empire had carried on as Constantine had decreed.

In the process of implementing this decree, however, Christianity had co-opted pagan time for its festivals and calendar, without scriptural mandate and in obvious contradiction to scriptural command and example; a number of pagan temples and sites had been rebuilt as Christian basilicas and churches; and orthodoxy, as defined by church councils, had replaced apostolic teaching and practice. Yet the level of acceptance of this modified Christianity was not as great as church historians would have us believe. At the personal level, paganism and what was termed Christianity coexisted, and only a set of confused boundaries separated the two.

Meanwhile, as the century closed, John Chrysostom, bishop of Antioch, railed against Christians who still kept Jewish holy days, a practice that had been outlawed by two prior church councils of that century in an effort to distance the church from Christianity's Hebraic roots.

At the same time, the line between faith and philosophy in Augustine's world was also becoming confused. Augustine's own parents were a case in point, the two of them being at opposite ends of the spectrum. His mother, Monica, was a devoted Roman Catholic; his father, Patricius, was a pagan who wanted his son to have a classical education in philosophy.

While Patricius pushed his son in that direction, Monica made an obvious attempt to instill a knowledge of the Scriptures and church teaching into her son. But at this point in the young man's life, philosophy won the day. The famous challenge of third-century theologian Tertullian, "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?" (suggesting that faith and philosophy have nothing in common), would receive a robust reply at the hand of Augustine.

During the course of Augustine's lifetime, the blurred boundaries between Christianity and paganism, and between faith and philosophy, were redrawn. Paradoxically, this created a world in which paganism seemed simply to disappear.

THE EVOLUTION OF IDEAS

Eulogizing Augustine and praising his efforts in an August 1986 apostolic letter to commemorate the 16th centenary of his conversion and baptism, Pope John Paul II quoted several of his predecessors. Pope Paul VI had written, "Indeed, over and above the shining example he gives of the qualities common to all the Fathers, it may be said that all the thought-currents of the past meet in his works and form the source which provides the whole doctrinal tradition of succeeding ages."

In quoting this, John Paul II (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-john-paul-the-second/581.aspx) encouraged the study of doctrines based on Augustine's writings, and so the past 16 years have seen a blossoming of new material relating to Augustine, shedding light on the evolution of his teachings.

As it turned out, Augustine's interest in philosophy prepared him for his auspicious role in the church much more effectively than did his mother's patient religious instruction. The young man attended the equivalent of a university in Carthage, where he studied Cicero's *Hortensius*, a work which has been lost and which we know today only from some of Augustine's writings. At the time, Cicero's essay was used principally as a study in rhetoric and oratory, but it also served as Augustine's introduction to philosophy. No more were the theater and bright lights of Carthage to occupy his time; the search for truth and wisdom would now consume him. The study of Cicero created in the young man a thirst for knowledge that would characterize his life both in and out of the church from that point forward.

But in Augustine's quest for truth, the Christianity to which he had been exposed in his youth provided no satisfaction. In his view the Scriptures lacked eloquence; they were simplistic and naive in that they didn't seek to answer the philosophical questions that now filled his mind. Christianity, cut off from its Jewish heritage, lacked answers to the questions of philosophy, especially in relation to the nature and reason for the existence of sin. The philosophers scorned Christian belief in a benevolent God who allowed sin and suffering to exist. And no church father seemed willing or able to counter the critics.

IN SEARCH OF ANSWERS

Assigning responsibility for evil and eradicating it from human life became part of Augustine's mission. He looked back with disgust on his youthful excesses while in Carthage. How could the "evil" of the self be controlled? Why did it exist in the first place?

[Manichaeism](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1105) was the first teaching Augustine encountered that claimed to provide an answer to the problem of evil. As a religion, it denied any personal responsibility for evil, absolving the individual of guilt. Over time, however, Augustine found flaws in the teaching, not as regards evil, but in its relationship to the physical world.

Next Augustine developed an interest in astrology, which contradicted the claims of the Manichees. Eventually he was introduced to Faustus, the most gifted advocate of the Manichees in the Western empire, who Augustine hoped could help him resolve his mounting questions. It became apparent, however, that Faustus was more interested in developing a following among the people of Carthage.

Augustine's increasing disillusionment with the teachings of Mani coincided with his exposure to another philosophical school. On his subsequent arrival in Milan, he became aware of Ambrose, the city's bishop, and his interpretation of the Scriptures using Neoplatonic ideals.

Ambrose was an intellectual giant of Milanese society and, as a result, highly regarded by all. As a bishop, he followed in the footsteps of both Origen and his Alexandrian school of allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures, and of the philosopher Plotinus, who had, in Augustine's estimation, enabled Plato to come to life again.

Ambrose taught Augustine how to use the Scriptures against the Manichees. Because he had been associated with the sect for so long, it was now necessary for Augustine to publicly distance himself from the heresy. But Manichaeism never quite lost its grip on him. The charge that he had never completely outgrown his Manichaean past was leveled at him even late in life.

An example of that influence is the dualism (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-philosophy-dualism/1107.aspx) of the Manichees, which provided an entree for Augustine into Neoplatonism and its own version of dualism. Platonic thought looked beyond the physical to the real world, which, according to Christians like Ambrose, was the spirit world.

Augustine's adoption of the new philosophy was wholehearted. The new world of dualism aroused in him a desire to retreat from society to a life focused on the pursuit of the spiritual and, with it, of the truth he believed philosophy could provide.

POSTHUMOUS ACCLAIM

Today Augustine is regarded as the most powerful Latin voice among the church fathers. More than that, he is placed second to the apostle Paul in the development of Christian thought and doctrine. And since some prominent biblical scholars have claimed that the apostle Paul actually founded Christianity, some might even argue that Augustine's contribution to the theology of the Catholic and Protestant churches places him ahead of Jesus Christ in terms of importance within the church.

Celebrated as he is today, however, Augustine was not accorded fame within his own lifetime. Atticus, a contemporary of Augustine and patriarch of Constantinople, didn't even include him in his greetings when writing to fellow bishops in North Africa. Theologians were numerous throughout the empire in those days, and a Latin was insignificant when there were so many Greek-speaking theologians in the East.

But Augustine was a prolific writer. As a result of the copious written materials left behind for future generations, status came to him posthumously. His words, always used to great advantage, have echoed down through the centuries. Some of his sermons were rediscovered as recently as the 1980s, adding a fresh impetus to the study of his ideas.

His writings cover a wide range of topics. In his treatise *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine sought to combat Manichaeism. *Confessions* followed, in which he set out the course of his life. Many of his works were the result of years of effort. *The City of God* was written over roughly a 15-year period. Numerous of Augustine's sermons were copied verbatim for future study, together with defenses of his faith against heretics and schismatics.

The Bible, and the apostle Paul in particular, posed some difficulty for the bishop in his writings, in that the Scriptures speak against the "wisdom of this world." Somehow Augustine had to bridge this divide. How could he reconcile the world of the philosophers with the world of the Bible?

His first step was to break with the traditional view of philosophy. According to Angelo DiBerardino and Basil Studer's *History of Theology* (Volume 1), up until Augustine *philosophia* was understood to be the "search for wisdom, that is, the effort of the mind to attain to truth and to contemplate the absolute or the principles of being." As this was perceived as being worldly wisdom, against which the apostles spoke clearly, philosophy had generally been avoided by the church. Augustine, on the other hand, took philosophy to mean *amor* or *studium sapientiae* (that is, the love or pursuit of wisdom). In so doing, he equated the love of wisdom with the love of God and of Christ, the latter being regarded as the wisdom of God.

It should be noted that shortly after the time of Christ, Christian apologists and writers had already started to speak as philosophers and defend their faith in philosophical terms. Augustine simply completed a work that had already begun. Once Constantine had established Roman Catholicism as the state religion, the ground was laid for someone of Augustine's energy to harness the philosophical approach and use it for his own purposes within the church.

The celebrated bishop died as the Vandal hordes invaded the Roman Empire. In the aftermath of that invasion, the Dark Ages descended on Western society. But Augustine had provided the philosophical framework within which the church's beliefs would survive.

In the 13th century, Augustine's Neoplatonic view of the world and Scripture was refreshed by the efforts of Thomas Aquinas and his study of the Greek church fathers, and of Aristotle in particular.

Augustine's doctrinal approach was also to survive the Reformation, influencing both sides of the argument. Martin Luther was part of the Augustinian order of the Roman Catholic Church, and during the Reformation he continued the teachings of the famed bishop with

respect to faith and sin. Even John Calvin (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-john-calvin/19600.aspx) was deeply indebted to Augustine. Today, Christian existentialism and even evangelical Christianity owe a debt to Augustine in their approach to Scripture and doctrine.

ATHENS OR JERUSALEM?

Because of the bishop's wide influence, it is helpful to understand the external forces that helped to shape his thought. Did he ever completely lose the Manichaeistic trappings of his youth? As mentioned earlier, Augustine had to defend himself against this charge to the end of his days. But while Manichaeism may have shaped his attitudes toward various elements of the physical world, Neoplatonism (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-philosophy-ideas-neoplatonism/1106.aspx) was clearly the greater influence.

"Indeed," writes L.H. Hackstaff in his introduction to *Saint Augustine: On Free Choice of the Will*, "it is not too great an exaggeration to say that Neo-Platonism provided Augustine and the Christian Platonists who followed him with the theoretical substructure on which their theology was built. It seems that Augustine never abandoned the Platonistic matrix of his Christian theology."

The late Enoch Powell, classicist and British parliamentarian, takes Hackstaff's conclusion a step further. He sees Augustine arriving, "ironically, at a sort of synthesis of all the major philosophical lines descended from the Platonic Socrates: Epicurianism … Stoicism … [and] Platonism."

This may explain how Augustine's thinking came to differ so from the teachings of the Bible. His approach was dominated by a dualism derived from the philosophers—a dualism that set one part against the other, principally spiritual against physical. One was right, the other was wrong.

Yet, while the Bible speaks in dual ways of the spiritual and the physical, the outer and the inner, the present and the future, it does not necessarily ask us to ignore one in favor of the other but proposes attention to both. The physical helps us to understand the spiritual; the present is as important as the future. What we do externally is judged, but so is the internal.

This approach was reflected in Hebraic thought, and that of the apostle Paul in particular, in that it looked upon humanity as a whole rather than as an assemblage of discrete parts. Hebraic thinking was more nuanced than the rigid logical syllogisms of the philosophers. Raised in a religious culture that had sought to reject its Jewish roots, Augustine had been caught by the trap of the philosophers.

The fact is that reality exists both here and now as well as in the future. Contrary to the beliefs of the philosophers, that reality is not based on reason alone; it also requires faith. It is a more demanding path than that taken by any of the philosophies, which is why Jesus Christ described his way as a difficult one, which so few find (Matthew 7:14).

On reflection, the lesson of Augustine's lifework could be summed up as follows: No matter how hard you try to reconcile the two, Jerusalem has nothing to do with Athens. Faith and philosophy exist on totally different planes. Any attempt to syncretize the two leads to the denial of one. Augustine's efforts to marry them, whatever his purpose, in the end simply re-dressed paganism with Christian nomenclature.