

Chapter 1

Confessions

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

Augustine of Hippo, one of the greatest Christian writers in Christianity and especially in the Western Church, was born in Thagaste, a seaport in North Africa, part of the Roman province of Numidia (present-day Algeria). As he was a precocious child, his parents, Patricius and Monica, made great sacrifices for his education and had high hopes for him. Monica, a devout Christian, prayed hard to inculcate him with her faith. Augustine, however, did not take his mother's faith seriously. At the age of 17, he took a mistress and had a son with her. At 19, he came under the influence of Manichaeism, a gnostic sect, but left after nine years as a member.

He taught rhetoric in Thagaste, Carthage, Rome and Milan. Augustine eventually settled in Italy and joined the Roman civil service. While in Milan, he underwent a conversion experience in July 386 and was baptised by Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (339-97). This renowned conversion is narrated in his most famous work, *Confessions*.

Augustine returned to his home town in North Africa in 388. Although considering himself unworthy, he was ordained a priest in the coastal town of Hippo Regius in 391 and became a bishop in 395. Besides administering the affairs of the local church in North Africa, Augustine was also busy writing in defence of the Christian faith against various heresies such as Manichaeism, Donatism and Pelagianism, and these works later shaped and defined orthodox Christian doctrines. He pursued constructive

engagement and dialogue with Western classical philosophy, poetry and rhetoric. Augustine is credited with developing the genre of autobiography in the *Confessions*, as a means of praising God and inspiring others in the faith. His psychological insight and dramatic expressions of intellectual doubt and moral weakness made him one of the most compelling authors in Christian history. Influencing many writers throughout the ages, Augustine's dramatic conversion and theological insight contributed to the advancement of Christian literature.

Oddly enough, Augustine was critical and mistrustful of literature, especially fiction, for its power to seduce and mislead. Regarding the theatre he wrote, 'How is it that a man wants to be made sad by the sight of tragic sufferings that he could not bear in his own person? Yet the spectator does want to feel sorrow and it is the feeling of his sorrow that he enjoys.'¹ Literature allows us to feel sadness without undergoing that experience and thus removes us from the truth. Augustine also recognised the importance of storytelling in leading us to the truth about God and human existence. In fact, he developed a literary form that subsequent prominent authors have followed. It became the framework of *Confessions*, a narrative recounting a restless journey from childhood to adult spiritual maturity after undergoing a conversion experience. This idea that narrating one's life story can lead to spiritual enlightenment has influenced literature ever since.²

Autobiography was very much part of the Roman literary tradition, with tales of individuals searching for truth amid worldly temptations. The publication of Augustine's *Confessions* between 397 and 400, however, was considered ground-breaking in Latin literature in that it dealt with introspection and the development of the soul. Christian biographies were popular in the early Church, for example, St Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, Jerome's *De Viris Illustribus*, Cyprian's *To Donatus*, Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, and the treatise *On the Trinity* by Hilary of Poitiers. Focussing on present trials, such as imprisonment and martyrdom, most of these accounts are relatively short and lack the depth of introspection exhibited in Augustine's *Confessions*. During his time,

1. *Confessions* 3.2, pp. 37–38. All quotations are taken from F.J. Sheed, trans., *Confessions*, 2nd ed., with notes by Michael P. Foley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 2006).

2. Robert Peter Kennedy, Kim Paffenroth, John Doody and Marylin Hill, 'Introduction', in Robert Peter Kennedy, Kim Paffenroth and John Doody (eds.), *Augustine and Literature* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), p. 1.

the Church became firmly established in Roman society. The enemies of Christianity were no longer seen as coming from outside but rather as being inside the individual. The peak of the person's life would not be dying but living for God, not martyrdom but conversion. Augustine's *Confessions* represents the best in the tradition of religious autobiography in which we 'witness the stages of human cooperation with transforming grace',³ teaching us to transcend.

This chapter explores Augustine's teaching on creation and sin in *Confessions*, which in many ways emerged out of the influence of Manichaeism upon him, and also his refutation of it. It was also supported by his reading of Neoplatonism and the Pauline epistles. According to J. Kevin Coyle, 'Manichaeism formed for Augustine the conscious foil against which he measured his Christian orthodoxy, affecting the choice of the themes he worked with and how he dealt with them.'⁴ Without his encounter with Manichaeism, as a follower and also as a foe, Augustine's theology would be very different, for most of his works were polemical and pastoral pieces written against this backdrop. He might have left Manichaeism, but Manichaeism never totally left him. Augustine's reading of Neoplatonism, whose veracity could be supported by the scriptural authority of St Paul, and the influence of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, eventually led him to be reconciled with Christianity. *Confessions* is about his return to Christianity rather than a conversion.

Manichaeism

Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, was born in Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) in 216. Convinced that he had a revelation from God, superseding other religious founders, Mani established the 'Religion of Light', a fusion of elements drawn from Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and gnostic Christianity. It rejected the Old Testament and claimed to be authentic Christianity, spreading across Egypt, northwest Africa, the Roman Empire and even China. Mani regarded himself as the 'apostle of Christ', the Paraclete that Jesus had promised. A threat to Christianity and native religion, Mani was attacked by Zoroastrian priests and died in prison in 274.

3. Quoted in Janet Taylor, 'The Confessions of St Augustine: A Spiritual Classic', *Crux* 21, no. 3 (1985), p. 19.

4. John Kevin Coyle, *Manichaeism and its Legacy* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), p. xxi.

Central to Manichaeism is the problem of evil, which Mani attempted to resolve by a myth regarding a pre-cosmic battle between powers of light and darkness. Mani maintained that fragments of divine light are captured by the evil powers of darkness that remain in the physical bodies of human beings. This divine light could be liberated by adhering to Manichaean rites, doctrine and diet. Mani presented his cosmogony, an explanation of the origin of the universe, in three phases: first, good (spirit and light) and evil (matter and darkness) have separate and distinct existences; secondly, in the present state good and evil are intermingled; thirdly, good and evil return to their separate existence. Thus, the two principles of good and evil are completely separated in the beginning. However, during the second phase, the evil principle invaded the good principle and trapped the light in darkness. God caused the evil principle to create the visible world out of this fusion to liberate the light from darkness. God himself also created a planetary system of sun and moon to collect any light released from darkness and eventually return to the good principle.⁵

Manichaeism asserts that Adam and Eve were created not by God but by an evil initiative, the union of demons, to keep the light trapped in the material world. Each human being is a microcosm in which the primordial battle between matter and light takes place. The person can be saved by removing himself from this cosmic chaos, which requires special knowledge given only to the Elect, the 'perfect ones', who heard the call and responded to it. The Elect are elite members of Manichaeism who followed a special diet, practised asceticism and celibacy, and prayed regularly. The other members are the Hearers (catechumens), whose primary duty is to serve the Elects. They could own property and get married, but procreation was discouraged.⁶

The Hearers' hope is to be reborn as one of the Elect, while the destiny of the 'Elect' is to recover their light substance and return to their rightful place. This will happen during the third phase, when much light has been released through the effort of the Elects. After that, the physical world will disappear, and the evil substance will return to the dark realm, once more separated from the light. Nevertheless, some of the light remained trapped in darkness forever.⁷ This esoteric religion that regards matter and creation as evil fascinated the young and restless Augustine.

5. Coyle, *Manichaeism and Its Legacy*, p. xiv.

6. Coyle, *Manichaeism and Its Legacy*, pp. xiv–xv.

7. Coyle, *Manichaeism and Its Legacy*, p. xv.

As a Hearer, Augustine was familiar with Manichaeism's teaching, methods and practices. He had to serve food to the 'elect and holy, that in the factory of their stomachs they should turn it into angels and deities by whom I was to be set free'.⁸ Truth attainable by reason without faith was given to its founder, Mani, who had chosen the Elect to mediate between God and human beings. One may wonder how such a religion with its bizarre myth and absurd dietary regulations appeared credible to a highly intelligent young man like Augustine. He remained a Hearer for a staggering nine years!

Manichaeism's claim to be an authentic version of Christianity might have led Augustine to believe that it could help him to understand the Bible better. This new religion offered him justification for his ongoing sexual relations. With their interest in astrology, a community of believers assured him of friendship and support. Most importantly, the Manicheans taught Augustine that he could discover the truth through reason, and solve the problem of good and evil.

Origin of Evil

The eclectic teaching of Manichaeism appealed to Augustine because it offered answers to his questions regarding the nature of the divine and the problem of evil. This gnostic philosophy holds that evil does not come from God but from a separate substance that has invaded and captured the good. Not limited to human shape, God is 'a luminous immeasurable body', while the person is 'a kind of particle broken from that body'.⁹ Thus the goodness of human beings is assaulted by the evil substance.

By adopting Manichaeism, which asserts that the forces of evil could not harm the good soul, Augustine finds justification in avoiding guilt. The soul remains untarnished because it contains elements of divine substance, as it were. Thus, as a Manichaean, Augustine found consolation even as he struggled to find the self-discipline to leave his mistress, which was a grave concern for his mother. This moral strain of Manichaeism appears as a consolation or justification for his waywardness:

For I still held the view that it was not we that sinned, but some other nature sinning in us; and it pleased my pride to

8. *Confessions*, 4.1.1, p. 55.

9. *Confessions*, 4.16.31, p. 72.

be beyond fault, and when I did any evil not to confess that I had done it, that You might heal my soul because it had sinned against You. I very much preferred to excuse myself and accuse some other thing that was in me but was not I.

Nonetheless, he was willing to acknowledge that the impiety that caused him to offend against God was ‘wholly I’.¹⁰

Initially, Augustine’s ego was attracted to a rational and dualistic philosophy that exonerates the good soul from sin. Presenting itself as genuine Christianity, Manichaeism drew him:

Here are all the elements that attract him: idealistic thought, aesthetic leanings, a richly developed symbolism, and a carefully nurtured mysticism. With this, for ‘the initiated’, comes the privileged enjoyment of higher knowledge. And one final point: in Manichaeism – as in every gnosis – the genuinely ethical is dissolved in the cosmic; evil simply becomes part of world happening, thus mitigating personal responsibility for it.¹¹

Be that as it may, Augustine was rather sceptical about the doctrine that materialism espoused. A dualistic understanding of evil means that the good cannot be accountable for wrongdoings. It also implies that the good is not invincible but could be overcome by the dark forces. Despite this doubt, Augustine remained a member of this sect for nine years until he encountered their famous Manichaean bishop, Faustus, who revealed to him that they did not have all the answers.¹²

Realising that he was misguided, Augustine would refute the erroneous doctrines of Manichaeism from a Christian perspective because it does not make a clear distinction between the creator and his creation. The Manichaeans conceive God, not as a divine being, but as part of the world. Augustine admits: ‘When I desired to think of my God, I could not think of Him save as a bodily magnitude, for it seemed to me that what was not such was nothing at all: this indeed was the principal and practically the sole cause of my inevitable error.’¹³

10. *Confessions*, 5.10.18, p. 86.

11. Romano Guardini, *The Conversion of Augustine* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1960), p. 170.

12. *Confessions*, 5.7.12, p. 82.

13. *Confessions*, 5.19.19, pp. 87–88.

Manichaean teaching maintains that God and the world make up the whole cosmic reality while the divine element, though highest, remains part of the universe.

If God is part of the cosmos, Augustine concludes that the Manichaean deity is corruptible. God is not transcendental and distinct, but just another being in the world, mingled with contrary powers of light and darkness.¹⁴ Manichaeism maintains that the human soul, a member of God, a part of divine substance, is under attack by the body, identified as the evil matter. A person has two eternal principles, representing the whole cosmic reality. Augustine also holds that each person is a microcosm with spiritual and physical elements, but this being is ontologically distinct from God, the creator, whereas in Manichaeism, God and human beings are conflated.

Augustine believes that this denial of the distinction between God and his creation leads humans to be proud. They would like to be the light, not in the Lord, but in themselves, as they imagine 'the nature of the soul to be the same as God'.¹⁵ Rejecting moral responsibility, this arrogance leads to the denial that humans are culpable and responsible for their sins, and to the belief that they are merely victims of the cosmic conflict between good and evil.¹⁶

Ambrose of Milan

Incidentally, another bishop from the Catholic Church, Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, provided Augustine with the answers that prepared his way to embrace Christianity wholeheartedly. Augustine writes: 'Faustus was simply straying about among the fallacies of the Manichees, Ambrose taught the doctrine of salvation most profitably.'¹⁷ A Roman aristocrat, Ambrose was a profound theologian and gifted orator who received Augustine 'as a father' and 'as a bishop' with kindness.¹⁸ Ambrose's eloquent preaching attracted Augustine to attend services regularly.

Ambrose, who was prominent in the Christian community, thus represented the Church for Augustine. Known for his allegorical

14. *Confessions*, 7.2.3, pp. 118–19.

15. *Confessions*, 7.10.22, p. 155.

16. See Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China*, 2nd rev. and expanded ed. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1992), pp. 25, 117–53.

17. *Confessions*, 5.13.23, p. 91.

18. *Confessions*, 5.13.23, p. 90.

interpretation of the Scriptures, Ambrose greatly influenced Augustine in accepting the Church as a teacher and as a place of grace and healing. The practice of celibacy and monastic observances in Ambrose's life sharply contrasted with the mechanical piety and vainglory that Augustine had come to associate with the Church. Augustine learned from Ambrose to accept the Church as a teaching authority on faith and morals, and at the same time, to accept personal responsibility for one's soul. A Pauline scholar, Ambrose impressed Augustine with a clear sense of personal sin and the importance of grace.

Pauline Influence

In *Confessions*, we read that when the African civil servant Ponticianus visited Augustine in Milan, 'he noticed a book on a gaming table ... he picked it up, opened it, and found that it was the Apostle Paul, which surprised him'.¹⁹ Ponticianus was a devout Christian. He narrated to Augustine the story of the Egyptian monk Antony, and the conversion and renunciation of his two friends when they encountered this work. Later, Antony is mentioned again, in the context of Augustine's own conversion, when he heard, 'Take and read, take and read.'²⁰ Augustine then took up the volume of Paul and read '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). The reading of Paul and the story of Antony underscores the important role of conversion and renunciation in Augustine's life.

Augustine turns to Paul to reflect on the disputes regarding sin, free will, Jewish law, the merits of faith and works, suffering, grace and justification. Paul's teaching on these questions provided scriptural authority to counteract heretical sects like the Manichaeans, who also venerated the apostle. Actually, Augustine's reading of Paul came indirectly through Manichaean texts and their refutations. Mani's mission was an imitation of Paul, emphasising dualism, the Holy Spirit, the Church and the rejection of Mosaic Law to such an extent that Manichaeism was labelled 'almost a Pauline heresy'.²¹ Claiming to be the true Church of Jesus Christ in the tradition of the Pauline churches,

19. *Confessions*, 8.6.14, p. 150.

20. *Confessions*, 8.12.29, p. 159.

21. Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University, 2006), p. 121.

the Manichaeans were ‘the most radical and self-confident of Paul’s expositors’.²²

After his conversion, Augustine wrote furiously to reclaim Paul for Catholic Christianity. He read Paul differently from the Manichaeans, focusing on the tension between flesh and spirit, the helplessness of human beings, and their utter dependence on the grace of God. Augustine believed that the Manichaean interpretation of Paul undermines Catholic teaching on salvation. Manichaean dualism contradicts the Christian belief of One God, creator of the world, which Paul himself upheld. Against the Manichaeans, Augustine upheld the undivided Trinity as well as the harmony of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Augustine also heard the true teaching of Paul in the Church, ‘And it was a joy to hear Ambrose who often repeated to his congregation, as if it were a rule he was almost strongly urging them to follow; the text: *the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life*’ (2 Cor. 3:6).²³

Pauline writings do not contradict the Platonists but confirm the truth that Augustine was searching for: ‘I found that whatever truth I had read in the Platonists was said here with praise of Your grace: that he who sees should not so glory as if he had not received – and received, indeed, not only what he sees but even the power to see, for what has he that he has not received?’²⁴ Everything depends on the grace of God, not on our own abilities.

Neoplatonism

Besides the encounter with Ambrose, the ‘books of the Platonists’²⁵ provided another significant influence in Augustine’s spiritual journey. Henry Chadwick puts it succinctly: ‘Ambrose has convinced him of the incorporeality of God and preached so profound a fusion of Christianity with Platonic mysticism that Augustine thinks of Christ and Plato as different teachers converging in the same truths, complementary to each other.’²⁶ Augustine thus began to perceive the nature of the divine as immaterial and the soul as superior to the body, corresponding

22. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, LA: University of California Press, 1967), p. 151.

23. *Confessions*, 6.4.6, p. 99.

24. *Confessions*, 7.21.27, p. 136.

25. *Confessions*, 7.9.13, p. 126.

26. Henry Chadwick, *Augustine of Hippo: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 29–30.