

## Saint Augustine

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I encountered St. Augustine when I was a boy of ten or so. It was in a historical anthology meant for school children. I was struck by the account of his sinful youth, lending poignancy and spice to his later saintliness. What was so great about him, I did not understand, save his saintliness, which I at that tender age had been taught to respect. Later in life his philosophical insights popped up in my reading, such as his admission of being stymied by the concept of time. For a long time the Church was the only intellectual outlet there was, and no wonder that theology would occupy such a central place in the world of an intellectual. Here there were abstract thoughts to ponder and it provided a scene for rhetoric and debate as well as literary activity.

Christianity was a sect among others and an interesting question is why it achieved such supremacy. To succeed you needed uniformity of purpose, meaning the repudiation of rival creeds as heresies, the closer they were, the more of a threat they presented. The existence of a scripture was of course of supreme importance, as it gave a normative regulator, although it was still open to a latitude of interpretations, including which texts to accept or not. Uniformity of purpose was essential in order to be politically effective, thus the analogies between early Christianity and political movements of the 20th centuries are striking. In Christianity there is a tension between the purely private and spiritual and the political, this holds to some extent for all religions, but it is particularly prominent in the history of Christianity.

One should bear in mind that Augustine was born in 354 in Thagastein North Africa some twenty years or so after the adoption by Constantine of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, thus at the time of his birth the former sect had achieved a political prominence it was not yet ready to fully assume. It was in a state of rapid expansion and hence provided plenty of opportunities for enterprising young men to seize. There was a shortage of competent staff, from bishops and down, to fill the offices. Many priests could not write nor read, and among those who could, few were solidly educated and even fewer still had the necessary gift for oratory and reflection. It was also a time of decay and decline, especially of the Western half after the split at the end of the fourth century A.D. Christianity was still in some flux there being dissenting sects, notably the Manichaeans, founded by Mani in Persia during the third century, which was wide-spread (reaching China) and powerful enough to have supplanted the Orthodox or Catholic Christians. Augustine was very attracted by their teaching and became a disciple in his late teens, but never reaching any higher rank. What attracted him was their ideas of good and evil and how those could be reconciled, gradually, however, he became disillusioned and drifted away. During an extended sojourn in Italy he fell under the influence of the Bishop Ambrose and in 387 converted to Catholicism, the same creed as that of his mother Monnica, who always played an important role in his life. Although Manichaeism no doubt would have a lasting influence on his thought he repudiated it throughout his

life and thought of it as his greatest transgression. His early life was filled with many other more temporary transgressions, although for dramatic reasons he no doubt exaggerated them in his *Confessions* (which the author thinks is a misleading title to modern readers and replaces it by 'the Testimony'.), the source of which he understood was his desire for companionship. Thus his conversion would be the result of changing one set of friends for another set, more sophisticated and powerful. Augustine was no stranger to the pleasures of the flesh, especially in his youth, and already as a teenager he fathered a son with his companion or concubine Una, who accompanied him to Rome along with his mother. In Rome he would make a socially favorable marriage to a young bride of good family and connections, which necessitated sending his mistress back to Africa. A move that caused him deep regret, not only morally. As a consolation he acquired in the interim another mistress until his bride would come of age, unable as of yet to lead a life of abstinuous continence and chastity. After he returned to Africa, he would never travel across the Mediterranean again, the sea having been an horror to him. As a truant youth he had neglected his education, in particular never learning Greek, which would turn out to be a handicap. However, the deficiencies of his formal education did not prevent him from developing formidable skills as a rhetorician especially in conducting sermons, and his talent did not go unnoticed and his services were sought after. In fact the bishop at Hippo so much admired him that he arranged for a permission to have to bishops active in the fortified town. And it was as a bishop of Hippo Augustine would be placed for the rest of his life, but it is clearly not for this he is known to posterity. His writings usurped most of his time and energies and became widely known, thus exerting a growing influence. Augustine was of course a religious man, it was as such he became known and venerated by his contemporaries, but deeper still he was a philosopher at heart, and theology was merely the medium through which he explored philosophical inquiries. Posterity would never had taken such a keen interest in him and awarded him such respect, had he been merely a pious figure expressing expected homilies and inanities. Although the bulk of his work was intellectual, he could not stay apart from the political struggles within the burgeoning Church. As such he was both active in stamping out dissent as well as trying to bring about conciliations between rival schools of thought, particularly the Donatists. As such he was both principled and indulgent. One of his principles was not to lie, lying was bad enough in ordinary life, but was particularly repellent when used to further the course of religion and faith. Thus he was against forcible conversion, as that invariably involved insincerity and lying on part of those who were coerced. True conversion could never be brought about under pressure but had to come naturally and spontaneously out of inner conviction, the process of which may of course be aided by arguments and intellectual persuasion. Thus he became indulgent when it came to punishment of the recalcitrant, as such never served any useful purpose. His services as a mediator were desired even in his old age and he undertook some extended and no doubt strenuous journeys in North Africa in his sixties. In his seventies he started to slow down and died at the rather mature age of seventy-six in his monk's cell in Hippo, eschewing for the first time in his life company,

The book, written for and appearing in a Penguin series of thumbnail sketches covering a motley crowd of people as diverse as that of Darwin and Rosa Parks, basically serves as an introduction to the saintly philosopher taking as its point of departure his *Confessions*,

no doubt the most extensive and extant documentation of his life. It provides a chronology and a review of his political activities, as well as some tantalizing samples of his philosophy, especially what pertains to time, in which the fleeting existence of the presence, that point in time separating the memories of the past from the anticipations of the future, plays a pivotal role. The presence is both for ever fleeing away yet continually present. The future has not yet taken place, the past has already done so, and both are beyond us, the present providing the only real existence, yet unable to be grasped. The tenor of the thought is definitely Greek and anticipates as such the Scholastics with Thomas Aquinas centuries later. As an interesting aside can be mentioned Tyconius, another of those heretics which exerted quite an influence on the thinking of Augustine. He was thankful to him for providing standards for interpreting the Scriptures as not to succumb to random ingenuities, a very strong temptation for a lively and driven imagination, as that of Augustines. What those standards consisted in, no illumination is given, but that is of secondary importance.

Finally Augustine wrote a lot. Letters, sermons, dialogues and books. Much of that seems to have been dictated to scribes, even very personal matters. Of course Augustine must have known how to write because he obviously knew how to read, reading providing his life-blood, but the production of books and texts was different back then before the time of printing, from what it is now, the author reminds us. Books had to be copied and if you were asked for a copy of one of your books this was not a trivial matter to fulfill as the book had to be copied by hand, and certainly not by the author. Augustine always kept copies of his own books for reference, but other copies may very well be copied in their turn and in the process edited and deformed. Thus books existed in many different versions and it was hard, nay almost impossible, to decide what was an authorized copy, which led to all kinds of misunderstandings. One wonders whether the present trend towards the abolition of books in favor of digitalization will lead to a return of the old situation. Texts can now so easily be copied and spread and in the process tampered with.

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