

Augustine and Neo-Platonism

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In Milan Augustine moved in a circle of intellectuals who thought of themselves as participants in a renaissance of philosophy. The work of the Platonic philosopher Plotinus (205-270), a man “so close to his master that in him Plato seemed to live again,”¹ had been responsible for the birth of Neo-Platonism. Plotinus’ editor, the brilliant Porphyry (noted also for his attack on the genuineness of Daniel’s prophecies), was highly thought of by Augustine. For the latter Porphyry was “doctissimus” and “the most notable pagan philosopher.” Porphyry’s popular work, *The Return to Heaven of the Soul*, may be taken, Peter Brown tells us, as a motto of religious life in Milan.²

Augustine’s intellectual colleagues, and his mentor in the faith, Bishop Ambrose, added a strongly Neo-Platonic dimension to Augustine’s developing thought. Fifty years earlier, an African professor of rhetoric, Victorinus, had become a member of the church and translated the works of Plotinus and other Neo-Platonic writings into Latin. Victorinus had also influenced Simplicianus whom Peter Brown describes as the “eminence grise of a most audacious attempt to combine Platonism with Christianity.”³ Simplicianus was the spiritual father of Ambrose. Augustine gave himself to a prolonged reading of Plotinus and Porphyry whose philosophy became “grafted almost imperceptibly into Augustine’s writings as the ever present basis of his thought.”⁴

The Neo-Platonic atmosphere in which Augustine ministered was as fundamental to his age as the idea of evolution is to our own. His reading of Scripture was not surprisingly colored by his Platonic presuppositions. There was a precedent for this fusion of philosophy with the Bible. Since the time of Justin Martyr and the theologians of the Alexandrian school, it had been customary to transfer the “Logos” of the Platonic system to the logos of John 1:1, with

¹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, University of California Press, 1967, 91.

² *Ibid.*, 92.

³ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

dramatic and disastrous results for the development of orthodox Christianity. Augustine therefore found no unbridgeable gap between his Platonism and traditional Catholic teaching. In talking philosophy he had in fact unwittingly been talking orthodox theology.

The phenomenon of an explicit Platonist influence in Augustine is widely recognized. In his *Confessions* he had spoken of his interest in “certain books of the Platonists, translated from Greek to Latin.”⁵ Clearly Augustine’s involvement with Scripture modified his Platonism. Yet it is fair to ask whether, despite his conversion, his view of anthropology may not have remained under the powerful influence of the earlier contributions to his formation. In *St. Augustine’s Early Theory of Man*, Robert J. O’Connell notes that:

Augustine came to the reading of Plotinus with an affectivity already polarized by years of Manichaeism. The Manichae view of *the soul’s imprisonment in body*, of sexual procreation as the darkest of sins because it perpetuated that imprisonment, was not exactly calculated to smooth his relationships with either his mother or the mother of his son. Nor was it designed to alienate him from the early Plotinus’ devaluation of both body and sense. More than that these were the very features of Neo-Platonism with which Ambrose’s preaching was most likely to resonate.⁶

Basic to Plotinus’ system of thought was the notion that the soul occupied a middle or mid-rank position between the material and sensual and the spiritual “trinity” of the One, the Nous (mind) and the World Soul. The soul of man, by becoming entangled in the things of the body and the world of sense, fell away from this “trinity.” It could find a path back to mystical union with the One through enlightenment and denial of all sensual experience. There are a number of striking parallels between the language of Plotinus and Augustine, of which we quote one:

Plotinus: The Fatherland to us is There whence we have come, and there is the Father. What then is our course, what the manner of our flight? This is not a journey for our feet; the feet bring us only from land to land; nor need you think of coach or ship to carry you away; all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see: You must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be awaked in you.⁷

Augustine: For it is not by our feet, nor by change of place, that we either turn from Thee or return to Thee. Or indeed, did that younger son look away with visible wings, or journey by the motion of his wings.

But, unknown to me, you soothed my head and closed my eyes so that they should not look upon vain phantoms and I became drowsy and slept away my

⁵ Bk. 7, ch. 9.

⁶ *St. Augustine’s Early Theory of Man*, Harvard University Press, 1968, 284.

⁷ *Enneads*, 1, 6:8.

madness and I awoke in Thee and saw Thee . . . and this sight was not derived from the flesh.⁸

O'Connell's examination of the very extraordinary parallels between Augustine and Neo-Platonism is summed up in the foreword to his book:

The theory that Augustine developed centered on the notion that man is a "fallen soul" who turned away from the Divine Beauty and plunged from a state of contemplative bliss into the world of body, time and action. In Plotinus' *Enneads*, Augustine discovered the most comprehensive framework for such a concept. Father O'Connell approaches Augustine through Plotinus in order to demonstrate that the Plotinian frame furnished the matrix for the elements of Christianity which the young Augustine was attempting to understand. He presents convincing evidence to show that Augustine's tendency to undervalue such human concerns as sex and love, culture, art, and scientific research arises not directly from the Christian message but from that message as passed through a Plotinian filter.

It is clear that Augustine is not a Platonist *tout court*. He accepted the doctrine of the resurrection which would have made no sense to Plato. Yet D.R.G. Owen in *Body and Soul* finds in both Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine traces of Orphism, the ancient Greek religion which provided the roots of the Platonistic dualism of "good soul" and "evil body." Thus Owen says of the Christian Platonists, including Augustine, that they wavered between a materialism which was closer to the biblical position and a false spirituality that was derived from their knowledge and love for Greek philosophy.⁹

It is important that this distorting tendency in Augustine's theology be recognized. Norman Snaith in his *Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* complains that:

Traditional Christianity has sought to find a middle way combining Zion and Greece into what is held to be a harmonious synthesis. The New Testament has been interpreted according to Plato and Aristotle and the distinctive Old Testament ideas have been left out of account . . . The wholly non-biblical idea of the immortality of the soul is accepted largely as a characteristic Christian doctrine . . . We hold that those who adopt this method of interpretation should realize what it is they are doing and should cease to maintain that they are basing their theology on the Bible.¹⁰

It may be suggested that the effect of Augustine's low estimate of the flesh led him to devalue things which Scripture approves as part of God's gracious

⁸ *Confessions*, bk. 1, ch. 18; bk. 7, ch. 14.

⁹ *Body and Soul: A Study of the Christian View of Man*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956, 57.

¹⁰ *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, London: Epworth Press, 1955, 9, 185.

gifts to man. An ascetic tendency has infected much American piety as demonstrated for example by absolute prohibition of alcohol and dancing, accompanied in some quarters by very questionable attempts to justify this by the Bible. Again the popular language about “going to heaven” reminds us of what Peter Brown calls the motto of the Platonists at Milan, one of whose leaders wrote of his deceased sister that “she loved the road that led to heaven.”¹¹ Is this the language of Jesus who speaks constantly of entering the Kingdom of God at the Parousia or the legacy of a new reading of the Bible in the language of Neo-Platonism? We might also ask whether the doctrine of the survival of the soul in the “intermediate state” has not effectively consumed in the minds of many the biblical, eschatological hope for the resurrection and the return of Jesus as Messiah and ruler of the Kingdom.

Augustine is largely responsible for the suppression of Chiliasm (Millennialism). While we may understand his objection to a “carnal” view of the millennium, his efforts to do away with the plain meaning of Revelation 20 seem to reflect his unhappiness with a future state of glory to be enjoyed in connection with *the earth*. Augustine reinterprets the future rule of the saints dependent upon the Parousia as the present interadvent “rule” of the church and the saints in heaven. This view gave rise to the whole medieval concept of a Christendom in which the church was the highest authority and to the widespread amillennialism of much of mainstream Christianity. But can the innocent passage in Revelation be so handled? *Peake’s Commentary* will reflect the misgivings about Augustine’s treatment held by many:

Since the time of Augustine an effort has been made to allegorize the statements of Revelation and apply them to the history of the church. The binding of Satan refers to the binding of the strong man foretold by Christ. The thousand years is not to be construed literally, but represents the whole history of the church from the Incarnation to the final conflict. The reign of the saints is a prophecy of the domination of the world by the church. The first resurrection is metaphorical, and simply refers to the spiritual resurrection of the believer in Christ. But exegesis of this kind is dishonest trifling...To put such an interpretation on the phrase “first resurrection” is simply playing with terms. If we explain away the obvious meaning of the words then, as Henry Alford says, “There is an end of all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything.”¹²

It seems clear that Augustine’s formation in Platonism influenced his treatment of Scripture at certain crucial points of doctrine. As a loyal churchman, Augustine was limited by his Catholic heritage which in the “church fathers” had already assumed a measure of Platonic preconceptions. Despite Augustine’s

¹¹ *Augustine of Hippo*, 91.

¹² Thomas Nelson, 1919, 941.

close involvement with the Bible and the passion of his devotion, his ability to grasp Scripture's essentially Hebraic ways of thinking was limited, especially in his understanding of the nature of man and eschatology, by a strong Platonic bias which he has passed on to often unsuspecting later generations.

It should not go unnoticed that the areas in which Augustine fell for the alluring attraction of philosophy affect the Christian Gospel itself — the Gospel about the coming Messianic Kingdom on earth. Augustine's delight in the departure of the "soul" to heaven has all but eclipsed the biblical truth that Jesus offered his followers a place in the Messianic Kingdom he plans to inaugurate when he returns to rule on earth. The Millennium will be the first stage of that reign of Christ and the saints on the renewed earth.