

# BOOK REVIEW

## On Augustine

The legacy of St. Augustine of Hippo, is a mixed one. He is accused of making sexuality sinful, legitimatizing authoritarian ecclesiastical systems, complicating Christianity with doctrines like the Trinity and of being more interested in a heavenly city than in the physical realities of this world.

Rowan Williams' book **On Augustine** (Bloomsbury, 2016 £25) demonstrates that these clichés have no validity. Indeed in an intellectually confused culture such as ours, Augustine has important things to teach us.

The book is a series of essays written over a 25year period. In the first three chapters Williams shows that Augustine's *Confessions* should not be read as autobiography but understood as prayer in which the author in trying to get a 'real purchase on the sort of beings we are.' *Confessions* and Psalms are here blended together. Augustine as a pastor wants believers to realise that their own inner life, is not a sanctuary of stability but a place of restless mystery. His exposition of the nature of 'signs', in chapter three, leads to his hermeneutic of Scripture and preaching. The aim of the preacher, he says, is to 'delight' but such delight in the congregation should spring not from the skill of the orator but from the subject matter of the speech.

The next two chapters deal with creation and evil. Some feminist theologians see a hierarchical dualism in Augustine which removes God from creation. They press for a God who is 'embodied'. Williams argues that this is a misreading. Augustine's theology of creation is derived from 'the course of the incarnate Word' (p.70), thus creation is in the process of realising its own dynamic and joyful equilibrium. Creation is good because it has been shaped by love. There can therefore be no real substance to evil. Evil is the absence of the good and arises from humanities desires and a misreading of signs and events.

Although evil is dreadful and disruptive God's justice and grace are at work in a redeeming process throughout space and time.

In the essay of the *City of God* Williams repudiates the charges of Hannah Arendt that Augustine is indifferent to the state and citizenship. Williams lists Augustine's critique of imperialism, the expansive state, the elitism of political leaders, the waging of war and of crusades. The comprehensiveness and subtlety of Augustine's writing however has allowed the Church in later centuries to argue for the very things Augustine questioned (page 110)

In the seventh chapter on *De Trinitate* Williams insists that Augustine and the Greek Fathers are not actually setting up two different models of Trinity (the West emphasising unity and the Eastern Church focusing on the three persons) as popularly supposed. Both are dealing with related issues. The main difference is in the vocabulary.

In his chapter on the incarnation Williams show that there is a oneness in Christ, unlike the Antiochenes who struggled with the question of whether Jesus was speaking from the divine or human side of his nature. A dynamic relationship of humility is evolving in Christ. The incarnation is thus a path for us to follow enabling human reason to be transformed by divine *sapientia* (wisdom).

Chapters nine and ten are difficult. Williams, in his exploration of self-knowledge has in mind the parallels and gulfs in the thinking of Augustine and Descartes. Drawing from *De Trinitate* Williams wrestles with the paradox of self-knowledge, namely that we need to love before we can know and that we need to know before we can love. Self-knowledge arises from an awareness of the conditions of our finitude. Williams shows that Augustine cannot be held responsible for the move in Western society towards individualism and abstract theism.

In his final chapter Williams challenges the views of those who argue that Augustine is indifferent to human compassion because of his belief that human nature is orientated towards God. When we try to love others independently of loving God we end up ‘using’ and reducing them.

This book is not bed-time reading, nor is it for the faint-hearted. It assumes that you already have some acquaintance with Augustine’s life, theology and writings. You should not be put off because this is possibly the most important book on Augustine to have appeared for many decades.

Williams lists Augustine contribution: a vocabulary and conceptual repertoire of Christian theology; a rich tradition of reading the psalms as spoken by Christ; a psychology of human consciousness which still haunts the European mind and finally his way of interpreting the central theological mysteries of Christianity so that they relate to holy living and holy thinking. I have, as others do, spoken glibly of ‘my spiritual journey’. Augustine has reminded me that until God comes to each of us individually first of all, any quest we undertake is doomed to end in emptiness.

Augustine is a theological giant who managed to steer a course between Manichaean pessimism, Platonist ecstasy, the Donatist quest for the ‘perfect’ Church and the misplaced Pelagian confidence in human nature. Today we struggle with these same systems who, with different names, still distort the human mind.

This book has forced me to think at a much deeper level and given me new insight into Augustine’s writings which I now perceive to be saturated with the marvel of God’s boundless grace.

As I continue to throw away more and more of my books, I am determined not to discard this one. I need it to save my faith from superficiality.

**A shorter version appeared in the Methodist Recorder in June 2016**