

# LATE ANTIQUITY

A GUIDE TO THE POSTCLASSICAL WORLD

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jour in Milan in the mid-380s, at the height of a renaissance of Platonic studies, provided him with both a new metaphysics that enabled him to answer Manichaeism (namely, that evil did not have its own existence but was rather the absence of good) and, particularly through the preaching of Ambrose, an allegorizing biblical hermeneutic through which he could see the Hebrew Bible as a genuine vehicle of Christian revelation. His longest and most definitive repudiation of Manichaeism, the *Contra Faustum* (398), he produced once back in Africa; but virtually all his writings in this first period, from his conversion (386) to the *Confessions*, are to some degree motivated by anti-Manichaean concerns.

Augustine's middle period was particularly taken up with combating the Donatists. In Catholic eyes a schismatic community, the Donatist church embodied the rigorist position taken by African Catholics during Diocletian's persecutions in 303-305. In their view, clergy who had complied with imperial demands to turn over the Scriptures were *traditores* whose sacraments were illegitimate and who themselves had to be reintegrated into the church through rebaptism. Neither transmarine episcopal authority nor the prestige of the newly Christian government under Constantine could shake the Donatist position; in Augustine's time they were still the significant North African church.

Augustine waged a war on two fronts against them. First, adopting the arguments of one of their own alienated theologians, Tyconius, he argued against any possibility of a visible church of the saints in the period before the End: the church was a *corpus permixtum*, and therefore Donatist perfectionism was both impossible and wrong. Second, and momentarily, he threw his prestige behind a new legal and political opportunity in 405 to prosecute Donatists through the power of the state. His writings from this period ultimately serve to support the state coercion of Christian minorities.

The Donatist controversy had sunk Augustine into specifically North African issues; against the Pelagians, he again moved onto an international stage. With the Vandal invasion of Italy in 410, cosmopolitan Italian Catholics were driven as refugees into the narrower world of North Africa, where a young colleague of Pelagius, Caelestius, inadvertently detonated the controversy by refusing to assent to some peculiarly North African theological positions when he sought ordination in Carthage. From 411 until the very end of his life in 430, Augustine contributed to the escalation of what was originally a clash of theological styles. In the course of this controversy, he went back to many of the issues that had defined his debate with the Manichees: the status of the body, and of sexuality; the effect of Adam's sin on humanity; the role of the soul in sin; the correct way to read Paul (Pelagius, like Augustine, had commented on the epistles). The Pelagian controversy ultimately defined Augustine's positions on heritable

## Augustine

Bishop of the North African city of Hippo from 396, Augustine (354-430) was an intellectual and doctrinal giant of the late Latin church. Almost all of his prodigious literary output survives, securely dated thanks to the catalogue to his own works that he assembled late in life, the *Retractationes* (428). Besides his formal works—commentaries, treatises, polemical tracts, speculative theology—there remains a large (and recently expanded) dossier of sermons and letters, as well as his singular, brilliantly original theological treatise that combines exegesis, epistemology, and polemic with haunting autobiographical meditation: the thirteen books of his *Confessions* (397).

Augustine did some of his best thinking when arguing. The conventional periodization of his life in terms of the controversies that engaged him can, accordingly, lend some insight into his development as a theologian and ecclesiastical campaigner. His first and formative battle was against the Manichees. From the age of sixteen as a student in Carthage, until his reintroduction to Catholicism some twelve years later in Milan, Augustine himself had been involved in this ascetic, dualist sect. As radical Paulinists, the Manichees repudiated material creation together with the Hebrew Bible and its god, seeing their warrant for such a rejection in Paul's opposition of law and Gospel, light and darkness, spirit and the flesh. They resolved the problem of evil, cosmic and moral, by postulating two independent and opposed realms, Light and Darkness, which battled with each other: man was a miniature instance of this cosmic conflict, his moral failings a reflection of the triumph of Darkness. Augustine's so-

original sin, on sexuality as a premier (but by no means sole) expression of the ineffectiveness of man's will, and on the individual's absolute dependence, to act rightly and even to believe, on God's grace.

Two other original theological positions, on Jews and on Christian millenarianism, developed in the course of these controversies, and are related to them and to each other. Against the Manichees, drawing on Tyconius as he reread Paul, Augustine came to emphasize Paul's own positive statements on the law. Against anti-Judaism, Augustine argued that biblical law was a medium of revelation and salvation continuous from the period of the Old Testament to the New; that Jesus, Paul, and other apostles of the first generation had been Torah-observant Jews; and that contemporary Jewish communities, in their insistence on observing the law's ordinances, performed a valuable service as witnesses to the church. In contrast to the coercion he was prepared to exercise against "deviant" Christian groups, Augustine made a principled exception of the Jews, arguing that any prince or person who coerced them to give up their practices stood under the sevenfold curse by which God protected Cain. Further, he argued that voluntary conversion of Jews to Christianity had always happened and would always happen, and that such conversions signaled nothing in terms of the approach of the End.

This rereading of Judaism fed into Augustine's opposition to apocalyptic millenarianism, which was endemic in most forms of Christianity both popular and clerical in the 4th and 5th centuries. Several centuries of erudite calculations had named the zone of time between 400 and 500 as the due date for the second coming, to occur when the world was 6,000 years old; persecutions (especially for the Donatists), natural disasters, the appearance of heresies, the fall of Rome, and, on the positive side, the fact that the government was now Christian, all stimulated this foundational Christian expectation.

Against this, and again drawing on Tyconius, Augustine argued that the period outside of biblical history was eschatologically opaque, that one could not know from current events anything of the divine plan: disasters always occur, government, whether pagan or Christian, is simply a secular imposition of order on disorder; and the church (here his anti-Donatist ecclesiology figures) will remain an imperfect, mixed body until God closes the age.

All these themes come together to shape Augustine's last masterwork, the *City of God*. Opening with a comprehensive indictment of Roman and classical culture as a moral failure, Augustine proceeds to trace history since creation, organized according to the object of love, *amor sui* or *amor dei*. Those who love God are citizens of the heavenly city; those who love themselves, of the earthly city. The two cities of apocalyptic tradition, Jerusalem and Babylon, thus transmute to two opposed moral communities existing, indefinitely

mixed, in time. Only biblical history in its two movements, Old and New Testament, clearly reveals God's will: in the present, all is indefinite and opaque, though the eruption of miracles in daily life displays the manifest power of the saints. Life in history is life in exile, an exile that will end only when time itself ends. Against his millenarian coreligionists, Augustine adds to the traditional admonition that none can know the hour of the End his own radical innovation, that though the kingdom will include the saints raised in the flesh, it will come not on a transformed earth but in heaven. His huge work closes with a meditation on the heavenly Jerusalem as the *visio pacis*, the vision of eternal peace.

Augustine himself knew no such peace. His last years were marred by his increasingly bitter conflict with Julian of Eclanum, spokesman for the Pelagian position. At the end of his life Catholic Africa was shattered by the invasion of Arian Vandals, who besieged Hippo as he lay dying. The city burned, but his library, and his tremendous legacy, endured.

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## Augustinianism

The term *Augustinianism* denotes various aspects of western culture that, in one way or the other, show the mark of Augustine, whether in questions of doctrine (original sin, predestination), philosophy (psychology of perception and of the soul), worldview (the secularization of history, church, and government), or personal style (traditions of literary confession, e.g., Petrarch). Along with Paul, whose letters he interpreted—in many ways decisively—for the west, Augustine had more of an impact on the European learned religious tradition than any other single figure.

This impact has an ironic quality. In 1933, Arquillère used the term *augustinisme politique* to designate a systematic misunderstanding and distortion of Augustine's position on the noneschatological quality of the earthly political realm. Gregory VII and the papal monarchy to the one side, Alcuin and Charlemagne to the other, sought to invest their respective spheres with an absolute value that Augustine himself would have denied. In addition to political Augustinianism, one might further distinguish historiographical August-

inianism, which linked earthly institutions to salvation history (e.g., the works of Orosius, and Otto of Freising), and chronological Augustinianism, which sought to fix a terminal date to the "invisible millennium" since the establishment of the church, a period whose duration Augustine himself had argued was unknowable in principle.

Augustine died as his city was besieged by invading Vandals. If Poitiers and Tours fought over St. Martin's body, those escaping Hippo had no question about the matter: they rescued Augustine's *corpus scriptorum*. In those days, where the prestige and importance of relics stood firmly at the heart of Catholic culture, this was a significant choice. Augustine was above all the saint of the literate, the clerical, the learned. His most lasting influence on subsequent western Christian culture, then, might be measured by the formation of a certain personality type. For centuries after his death, his writings continued to form and inspire men of the highest energy and acumen—mystics (Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh of St. Victor), chronographers (Bede, Otto of Freising), political thinkers and inquisitors (Giles of Rome, Bernard Gui), great reformers (Hildebrand, Luther, Calvin)—who, like Augustine himself, combined theological brilliance with equally profound ecclesiastical commitment, and who identified their own, sometimes idiosyncratic opinions, with the fundamental traditions of the church.

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