

Editorial

STUDYING AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO IN THE 21ST CENTURY. A PLEA FOR A RENEWED AUGUSTINOLOGY

Estudiar a Agustín de Hipona en el siglo XXI.
Una propuesta a favor de una agustinología renovada

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Guest Editor

Bestselling author Tom Holland described in his 2019 monograph *Dominion* what he considers to be the paradoxical situation that, despite the pervasive secularization of the West, Christianity comprises the most influential development in the history of the West. That Christian transformation of antiquity apparently still influences what we think about people and society today. One of the Christian authors of Late Antiquity that Holland regularly quotes is Augustine of Hippo. For philosophers and theologians it is beyond dispute that this ‘church father’ stood at the cradle of Latin Christianity, although they are not always entirely happy about this. The latter discomfort often has to do with Augustine’s radical thinking about a comprehensive divine grace, and what this implies, according to him, for ongoing human failure.

In the 16 centuries since his death, all aspects of his thought have been studied again and again, given rise to discussions again and again, and resulted in new interpretations – read from a contextually determined methodology in each era. His rich oeuvre continually raised new questions. These questions were the subject of renewed discussion in the centuries that followed his death, with the respective discussion partners each time bringing into the discussion the needs, questions, and intellectual paradigms of their

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own time and context. We theologians and philosophers of the 21st century are also essentially children of our time – our reading of Augustine is also a hermeneutic process. That is the purpose of this issue of *Cuestiones Teológicas*: to take stock of the most recent Augustinian research. How can we work theologically and philosophically with Augustine's thought in a way relevant to our society today? Which method will contribute to a fruitful discussion with the bishop of Hippo? How do text, context, author (and his 16 centuries of reception – the Augustinian tradition) and reader relate today in practising theology and philosophy in the wake of Augustine?

Twelve Augustine scholars – in all their diversity: from all corners of the world, from different perspectives, from different professional occupations, different ages and experiences – address this question in this thematic issue: how can we read Augustine today, how can we be theologians, philosophers, exegetes, ethicists, economists, historians, therapists ... following Augustine of Hippo?

As every hermeneutically-motivated method takes into account the original biography, context, writings and world of ideas of the author studied, we start the introduction to this volume with a short overview of Augustine's life story and oeuvre. In a second movement, we briefly introduce the 11 articles included in this special issue of *Cuestiones Teológicas*.

A biography of a restless soul

First we will briefly review Augustine's dramatic biography. He lived in a time of ideological plurality, religious fundamentalism, social unrest, economic and political instability. Augustine was born on 13 November 354 at Thagaste (present-day Soukh-Ahras, in Algeria), in Roman North Africa. His father Patricius was a Roman citizen, but did not belong to the wealthy elite. Patricius was not a Christian, and only had himself baptized on his deathbed. Augustine's mother, Monica, on the other hand, was a devout Christian. Augustine – although Roman by education – was a North African, was active as an author in the region we would today call Algeria and Tunisia, and his mother had Berber roots. Roman by culture, North African by origin. We must not forget this: the cradle of Latin Christian thought was in the region of North Africa.

Augustine studied rhetoric (eloquence) and later became a teacher in that discipline, successively in Thagaste, in Carthage (the capital of the African province), in Rome and in Milan (the capital of the imperial court). From the age of seventeen Augustine had a stable relationship of about 14 years with a woman – who has remained anonymous. She is often described as Augustine's concubine. Concubinage was then a legal commitment for partners who could not legally marry because of a different social status. They had a son, Adeodatus, who died at the age of 16, shortly after his baptism together with his father.

Augustine's life was dominated by his search for the truth. He first sought it in the faith of his mother. At first however he rejected Christianity. His objection to Christianity lay mainly in the Scriptures, which in those days were poorly translated into Latin. This clumsy language could not contain the truth according to the literary-trained Augustine. Moreover, this Bible text contained many inconsistencies. He also had difficulty with passages from the Old Testament in which a violent God was described.

He then thought that truth was best approached through Manichaeism. This movement rejected the Old Testament, promising a fully rational explanation of reality without the need for faith. Manichaeism offered its own solution to the problem of evil. According to Manichaeism, there are two separate principles in the world: good and evil. All good (equated with the spiritual, the immaterial) comes from the good god; all evil (the physical, the material) from the evil demiurge. The consequence of this dualistic scheme is that man himself bears no responsibility for evil. After all, everything that is evil comes from the evil god and is caused by the material things around us and in us. This moral deculpabilization of man gradually caused Augustine intellectual problems. He also decided that if the two divine principles are in conflict, then none of them can be omnipotent, and therefore, by definition, not divine. Augustine gradually came to the conclusion that Manichaeism ultimately demanded faith in its basic assumptions, which in themselves could not be rationally justified. This observation made Augustine a skeptic for a brief period.

Raising the academic ladder, while appointed as imperial professor and rhetor in Milan, he found in that city answers to two fundamental questions with which he was struggling. From Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, he learned the allegorical exegesis of the Old Testament: the difficult and seemingly contradictory passages of Scripture should not be read literally, but figuratively. In Milanese neoplatonic circles, he learned that the nature of evil is 'non-being'. God is good and all that God has made is good. Everything that 'is' was created by the good God and is therefore good. Being and good-ness thus coincide. Evil is the absence of good, consequently the absence of being. These answers convinced Augustine that the truth is in Christianity. He converted to Christianity and was baptized by Ambrose. This was mainly a 'philosophical' conversion at that time: he believed that Christianity offered the best perspective on truth. He then returned to North Africa, where, with like-minded friends, he formed a quasi-religious community focused on study.

His initially rather intellectual conversion to Christianity becomes more 'ecclesiastical' and 'catholic' when, during a liturgical celebration in the basilica of the port city of Hippo (today Annaba in Algeria), he is asked by the local bishop Valerius to assist him in his episcopate. Augustine was ordained a priest, and bishop a few years later. He succeeded Valerius on his death. As a bishop Augustine put his life at the service of his own local church community in Hippo: he preached, he was active as a local civic judge, he took care of the poor, ... He established a religious community around his basilica, of which he himself was a member. For this community he wrote a rule. This rule was very influential in Medieval Europe, as many religious congregations and orders followed it. He also felt an explicit bond with the universal Church. He travelled, wrote letters, participated in councils and spent much time in religious discussions and debates, especially against the Donatists and Pelagians.

Donatism divided North African Christianity into two camps, which, sometimes literally, faced each other with knives drawn. Donatism challenged the validity of the sacraments of clerics who at the time of the persecution of Christians had not chosen martyrdom and had collaborated with the persecuting civil authorities. Donatists strove for a pure and elite Christianity, advocating a strict separation between church and world, church and state. Only what is inside the church is holy and pure. Everything outside the church is sinful and must be rejected. In addition to this theological component, Donatism was also a nationalist group, a social and political protest movement, which in many ways defended the autonomy and interests of North African Christianity. By the time of Augustine's life this Donatism had become the dominant Christian tendency in North Africa. Augustine reacted against Donatism in various writings.

First of all, he stated that the Church is a ‘mixed body’: saints and sinners live together. Sinners do not need to be expelled from the community, for their sin is not contagious. Moreover, it belongs only to God to separate ‘the weeds’ from ‘the wheat’. Christians should tolerate and forgive sinners, assuming that everyone is ultimately a sinner themselves. Secondly, he stressed the importance of the unity of the church: any form of separation should be avoided since unity should be the main attribute of the church. This was no mere intellectual theological debate, but a fierce polemic that brought North Africa to the abyss of a violent civil war. Augustine, for instance, narrowly escaped an ambush. Together with Aurelius, the bishop of Carthage, Augustine succeeded in turning the tide. He achieved this thanks to imperial support. In an already unstable time (internal revolts, invasions by peoples outside the Roman Empire) Donatism (with a strong nationalistic, separatist and anti-Roman tendency) could count on little imperial support. A peaceful and reliable North Africa was of vital importance. North Africa was the granary of the Roman Empire and the supplier of horses for the Roman cavalry – an essential component for an army that had to be very mobile because of uprisings and invasions. The entire state apparatus therefore sided with the North African Catholic bishops, and the Donatists were forced to ‘return’ to the Catholic Church.

Pelagianism is a school of thought named after Pelagius. It encompasses the plurality of thought of Pelagius and his contemporaries Caelestius and Julian of Aeclanum, among others. They put the Christian moral life at the centre. Because they believed that every human being should do his best to live well, they were convinced that every human being also received from God the capacities to make his own life good. According to Augustine, the so-called ‘Pelagians’ thus put too strong an emphasis on human freedom of choice and autonomy, forgetting that man always needs the help of God’s grace (*gratia*). At the basis of Augustine’s doctrine of grace lies his view on original sin: since man’s first sin – Adam’s Fall – mankind is, according to him, imprisoned in sinfulness. Man cannot escape from his addiction to sin. To use a metaphor: Augustine sees man as a helpless child who, because of universal human sinfulness, is in need of an all-encompassing grace, a child who cannot stand on his own two feet and always needs the helping and correcting hand of a caring parent. Man must be constantly assisted by grace in all things. Caelestius, Pelagius and Julian consider man in his relation to God as free adult children, who have learned everything from their parents and now leave home, independently determine their course. Humans only need to be ‘started up’ by an initial grace, namely by being created with a good nature and rational and moral capacities. Grace is the condition – and no more – for right action. Both sides defended themselves in a multitude of writings. Augustine, supported by the united North African episcopate, the emperor and, after initial hesitation, successive bishops of Rome, succeeded in condemning the ‘Pelagian’ position. Caelestius, Pelagius and Julian, after their condemnation, disappear from the scene.

Augustine was a very active thinker and writer. He wrote about all kinds of essential philosophical and theological questions, which are still relevant today. For instance, in his *Confessions* – which belong to the canon of world literature – he described his own conversion story, the odyssey of his restless soul, his personal discovery of grace. Famous are the opening words of this account: “our heart knows no rest until it finds rest in you”. This work is considered one of the first autobiographies in Western literature. Many see in these *Confessions* – and Augustine’s plea for psychological introspection – the foundations of the modern subject. Connecting his own life story with the Christian story of creation, Augustine develops in this work an original vision of time, which has set many philosophers thinking. The *Confessions* – a milestone in Western literature – can be considered as a prism of Augustine’s life and thinking.

In his work *De doctrina christiana (On Christian Doctrine)* he lays the foundations for the development and expansion of a Christian culture and educational system in the Middle Ages: focused on the Bible, using all the scientific, philosophical and rhetorical tools of (non-Christian) Antiquity.

When on 24 August 410 the 'barbarian' Visigoths, under the leadership of Alaric, sacked the city of Rome – the symbolic centre of the Roman Empire, the 'eternal city' – this caused an enormous shock. First of all the invasion by the Visigoths caused large waves of refugees, who stranded in Augustine's Hippo, among other places. It was also a symbolic shock – the 'nine eleven' of antiquity. Many questioned whether this tragic event marked the end of an era. Others wondered why the Christian God had not adequately protected the city of Rome. In this context, old philosophical criticisms of Christianity flared up again: the Bible is full of inconsistencies, the belief in the incarnation – God becoming man – is a contradiction in terms, the Christian ethic (enmity, asceticism, humility, ...) is not viable and has weakened the Roman state and its time-honoured virtues of courage and self-sacrifice. To all these questions Augustine answers in his *De civitate Dei (On the City of God)*. He argues that Christianity is the most truthful philosophy, the only religion that truly leads to happiness, and makes Christians good citizens who play a positive role in society. In this massive work, he develops his conception of the two cities: the earthly and heavenly city. Thus Augustine reflects on the relationship between religion and state and develops a Christian philosophy of history. In short, Augustine separates the Church from the Roman state. In this way he ensured – on an ideological level – that when the Roman Empire finally vaporised – announced in the fall of Rome in 410 – the Church could continue to exist. In a nutshell, Augustine does not see the two cities as diametrically opposed *per se*, nor does he see the earthly city – our worldly society and political order – as fundamentally negative. He does, however, place the earthly city entirely under the sign of the heavenly city. Although here on earth we can work together for peace, harmony and stability, all this is only a passing phase – he calls it a 'pilgrimage' – on the way to heavenly happiness. Ever since US President Joe Biden quoted *De civitate Dei* 19, 24 in his inaugural address nobody has questioned the topicality of this *opus*. In this famous quote, echoing Cicero's philosophy, Augustine defines a *populus* (a nation, a people) by the common love object pursued by its members. Augustine would certainly agree with Biden's call for peace and stability, and would definitely concur with his quest for Truth, Augustine would probably do less so with his plea for the ideals of the American dream. Augustine would especially regret that Biden took his quote out of its original context and secularised it – with Augustine, the heavenly city is central, and the earthly city – to which Biden limited himself – is ordered by its heavenly purpose.

When Augustine was lying on his deathbed after a very eventful life, vandals were at the gates of Hippo. It could not be more symbolic: Augustine indeed lived at the end of a period, his thinking bridges the gap between Antiquity and the Middle Ages. He died on 28 August 430.

A Renewed Augustinology

The least we can conclude is that Augustine invites a debate on questions which have lost nothing of their force until today. However, how can we approach Augustine methodologically? Twelve scholars were invited to write a reflection on their specific method of reading Augustine, combining scientific insights with the specific objective of contemporary relevance, i.e. the needs and concerns of 21st century theology. As such, this volume of *Cuestiones Teológicas* endeavors to showcase a broad interdisciplinary and truly international new methodological approach of Augustine at the start of the 21st century.

Matthew W. Knotts brings philosophy, theology and history into harmony with the question of how a traditional *auctoritas* from the past such as Augustine of Hippo can be constructively relevant for contemporary theological and philosophical reflection – in terms of both content and method – without doing injustice to the original thinking of that authority through *Hineininterpretierung*. Is it possible to do constructive philosophical-theological research while drawing upon historical figures?

It goes without saying that the subject of free speech is highly topical. That debate has roots that go back to Augustine. **Pablo Irizar** applies the methods at the intersection of the study of emotions (history) and sensory studies (anthropology) to delineate the contours for an Augustinian theology of fearless speech. Irizar argues the potential of these methods to fruitfully read ancient texts anew, and to situate ancient authors as compelling contenders to address contemporary socio-political debates.

How to speak about God? How to read Scripture? Recurring questions in Christian theology. **Guido Jacobs** illustrates that metaphoric language – and the evolution in Augustine’s thinking about the use of metaphors to refer to God – is key in Augustine’s biblical hermeneutics. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly at a first glimpse, Augustine’s eventual use of metaphors is quite modern.

Hans van Reisen presents current trends in the research of Augustine’s homiletic exegesis. Much has changed in the last forty years: new finds of old texts, improved editions, digital techniques, new approaches of research and international networks. They have all consequences for our view on Augustine as a preacher and his pastoral practice.

Aäron Vanspauwen and Anthony Dupont propose a methodology for the study of Manichaeism in Augustine’s *Sermons for the People*. The sermons provided Augustine the opportunity to share his theological and ethical concerns in exchange with a responsive audience. Augustine’s anti-Manichaean stance is well known – as can be observed in his anti-Manichaean treatises, and in some of his sermons which explicitly tackle this ‘heresy’. However, Vanspauwen and Dupont suggest to look for implicit anti-Manichaean references in his sermons, to more comprehensively understand the anti-Manichaean basis of his theology, to gain more insight in his pastoral ‘tactics’ and in the relation between ‘spoken’ and ‘written’ word in Augustine’s oeuvre.

Joseph Grabau studies Augustine of Hippo’s reception of John’s gospel. Grabau summarizes and evaluates a series of research methods useful in contextualizing the bishop of Hippo’s theological points of departure and exegetical practices. In particular, Grabau explores how sensitivity to genre casts light upon Christ and the Church, the historical witness of biblical literature, the impact of passing controversy, and human emotion. As such, building upon existing scholarship, a renewed attention to Augustine’s readings of and sermons on John and the Johannine corpus, will result in a more comprehensive grasp of the biblical roots of Augustine’s thinking.

Zinan Zhang breaks the ground for an interdisciplinary and author-centred understanding of Augustine’s time theory. While the major studies of Augustine’s time theory follow different approaches, most of them remain text-centred, especially book XI of *Confessiones*. However, the text of Augustine’s *Confessiones* as a whole presented to us today is also a process produced by Augustine in a specific historical context. Zhang believes it is necessary to shed light on how Augustine as an author developed and expressed his ideas in different works, through a multidisciplinary perspective, in order to fully understand his theology of time.

In an innovative way, **Davi C. Ribeiro Lin** sees in Augustine's *Confessiones* a tool to bring theology and psychotherapy in mutual dialogue. Ribeiro Lin believes that Christian theology and psychology can be set as allies in order to provide insights and rebuild a fuller account of relational human flourishing. Reading *Confessions* in partnership with psychology, allowing cross-fertilization, is a valid and necessary challenge. More specifically, Ribeiro Lin puts the Augustinian notion of the heart ('cor') in dialogue with Miguel Mahfoud's *Elementary Experience in Psychology*. There is a correspondence in the description of the heart: both consider it the relational inner center that is immanently marked by transcendence, which sets the heart in a dynamic motion in an experiential-existential quest. Both disciplines strengthen each other to approach people with 'broken' hearts.

Drawing from Book XIX of *De civitate Dei* and other writings of Augustine, **Isaac Augustine Vasumu** focuses on Augustine's concept of *paterfamilias* as inspiration for contemporary reflections on peace and justice. Together with Augustine, Vasumu describes the idea of family as a legal, theological and sociological concept at three basic levels in relation to the ways through which the *paterfamilias* uses the machinery of family life to propagate peace, justice, unity and love.

Paul van Geest believes that relational values propagated by the Church Fathers, such as honesty, reliability and empathy, are necessary in our by economy dominated world. Such a patristic and Augustinian world view contributes to a society with a culture of reciprocity, respect, love and trust. Van Geest shows that rediscovering Augustine's societal methodology results in a renewal of the old ties between economics and theology as scientific disciplines, fundamentally arriving at a deeper and richer anthropological fundament for current economic research. Studying the patristic era and Augustine's intuitions thus entails a methodological resourcement of contemporary economic theories.

Laela Zwollo rereads in a Socratic way – as in a dialogue between past and recent history – Augustine's refutation of the Neo-Platonist Porphyry in book X of *De civitate Dei*. Her particular application of this method entails recognizing and objectifying universal factors or phenomena from recent history (more specifically, within interpretations of recent phenomena by contemporary historians). This brings Zwollo to reflect on how the contemporary method of decolonization and deconstruction of authorities can be applied on Augustine without falling into false dichotomies.

In the penultimate book of his *Confessiones* Augustine penned: “in diuersitate sententiarum uerarum concordiam pariat ipsa ueritas – in the diversity of true opinions, may truth itself produce concord (*Conf.* XII, 41)”. In this thematic issue of *Cuestiones Teológicas* we hope to offer the reader a broad plethora of meaningful methodological considerations to enter, departing from our contemporary world, into dialogue with the *doctor gratiae*, the methods to remain inspired by his quest for the Truth. I conclude this introduction on August 28, the heavenly *dies natalis* of Augustine. Today we sing the hymn dedicated to this *Magnus Pater*, and still hearing the echo of the third stanza of this hymn – *quae obscura prius erant, nobis plana faciens, tu de verbis Salvatoris dulcem panem conficis; et propinas potum vitae de Psalmorum nectare* – I hope – in gratitude for the work of the authors and editors – this volume helps to fulfil this prayer.

Leuven, August 28 2022.