

# *Ecclesiastical History*

## **ST AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO**

### **Fourth Century and Twenty First Century Man**

I first came across the works of St Augustine when I was introduced to his book ‘The Confessions of St Augustine’. The influence of his thought on my own has been immeasurable, mainly because it is perfectly in tune with the questions of life that apply to us today, even though his religious and cultural context could not be more different from our own. He was born in Thagaste, a small town in what is now Algeria in 354CE. He died whilst the Vandal war-bands were besieging his Episcopal See of Hippo in 430CE. He is therefore sometimes referred to as a ‘son of the twilight’, because he lived in one of the more protected parts of the doomed Roman Empire. When he was thirty-two years old, he had an emotional conversion experience (Book VIII). Before this, he describes his life as his ‘misguided and sensual youth’. Sitting in a garden in Milan, he heard the voice of a child from a nearby house, repeating the words, ‘take up and read’. He picked up his ‘Apostles’ book, as instructed, and read from St Paul’s Letter to the Romans (13:13-14): ‘... not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify desires’. There was no need for him to read on, because instantly a light of confidence had been poured into his heart and all the darkness of his doubt fell away. In his ensuing search for God, he applied a unique fusion between scripture and neo-platonism, that gave him the ability to reach out into the souls of others, resulting in him becoming one of the greatest western Church Fathers.

So then, what is going on in The ‘Confessions’? Well, it is a brilliant example of psychoanalysis of self, which exposes the inner man, ‘warts and all’. It is a kind of catharsis brought about through cognitive behaviour therapy—a therapy of self examination which is very much in fashion today. This is because Augustine comes across as a truthful fine thinker, who is prepared to bare his soul, not only to himself but also to his reader. Nevertheless, he clearly experienced conflict between his spiritual and the material world and The ‘Confessions’ are a verbalisation of his mental confusion. I certainly think that the threat of invasion of the Empire must have had a depressive influence on his thought. He was convinced that our earthly lives are marked by darkness, which not only has the effect of alienating one person from another, but which also weighs us down, thus making it



*St Augustine—by Sandro Botticelli*

difficult for us to ascend to God. For example, in Book X, he speaks of “a lamentable darkness of which the possibilities in me are hidden from myself”, and goes on to say, “which side will win I do not know—I just do not know”.

Most significantly, in the last three books of *The ‘Confessions’*, Augustine addresses the concepts of memory, time and creation. In his exploration of memory, he claims that memory is central to the shaping of a person. It holds the person together so to speak. He argues that although memories are in the past they register in the mind in the here and now in reality. In his words: “The power of the memory is great O Lord. It is awe inspiring in its profundity and incalculable complexity. Yet it is my mind, it is myself”. He argues that identity and continuity of self are rooted in memory. For example, he says, “Memory lies deeper than knowing and willing. It is the stomach of the mind” and “Memory is a storehouse which only has potential in the consciousness. All men have a universal quest for happiness, and memory is the medium through which the person becomes responsive to grace”. However, Augustine qualifies this idea by pointing out that to remember God is a conscious act of will, needing a decision. He writes; “The love of God is no indeterminate feeling but a certitude of the conscious. Man can only find God in the deepest abyss of his memory, present to the mind of the person who wills to order his life in obedience”.

How then, do these claims relate to current scientific thinking? For example, what if we posed the following question: ‘What if all our memories were suddenly replaced with new and different ones, would we still be ourselves?’ The answer to this question must be in the affirmative on a neuro-biological level because memory is a constant ‘work-in-progress’. When an object or experience is recalled, the neural pattern corresponding to that memory flashes through the brain as quickly and as clearly as a lightning bolt. However, like lightning it is swiftly gone. The next time that same event is remembered the pattern will be different, changed by a complex network of new associations and experiences. Despite these unstable foundations, we still manage to construct a stable idea of a personal identity from this welter of mercurial memory. The self is not a little person inside the brain, but a perpetually recreated neuro-biological state so continuous and consistently reconstructed that the owner is unaware that it is being made! I think that Augustine would have found this a neat argument. Indeed, in his words, “This memory of mine is a great force, a mystery my God, a hidden depth of infinite complexity and this is my soul, and this is what I am”.

Augustine's influence in moulding the thought of the Medieval West is beyond measure. His theological doctrines of grace and predestination shaped the work of Gregory, Charlemagne and Aquinas and more widely, Calvin, Luther and Pascal. During the Enlightenment, philosophers such as Rousseau and Descartes made radical claims on what it is to be human, defending the validity of original thought. Although Augustine could not have shared the social and political implications of these arguments, he too consistently looked inside himself for life's answers. Our pluralistic western culture has, in large, left behind the authority of the Church and scripture and has given way to an understanding of self that would be alien to Augustine. Nevertheless, it is still incumbent upon theology to argue its case within the boundaries of current philosophical and psychological parameters. I believe that Augustine would have thrived in this atmosphere, and in a sense, through his teachings, still does. In his words:

*“For behold, you have taken delight in truth, and he that does comes to the light. I desire to do truth in my heart Lord, before Thee, by confession, with my pen before many witnesses.”*

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