

Paul Copan **"St. Augustine and the Scandal of the North African Catholic Mind"**

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A couple of years ago, an evangelical historian Mark Noll wrote the book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Noll pointed out that modern evangelicals are not known for their rigorous thinking, nor does popular evangelicalism tend to sustain the intellectual life.[2] Such a situation, he pointed out, has practical implications. For instance, who will teach the children of evangelicals if they are not taught to love God with all their mind? All too often it is Hollywood or Madison Avenue[3]—not to mention fringe religious groups preying upon unprepared young minds.

This scandal within Christendom is hardly a first, however. One was taking place during the time of St. Augustine (b. 354). In this case, it was the scandal of the North African Catholic mind—a scandal which pushed him toward the Christian fringe group, the Manichees. During Augustine's day, North African Catholics were closed-minded toward reason, toward a faith seeking understanding.[4] And despite the simple, vibrant faith of his mother, Monica, the young Augustine did not receive within Catholic Christianity the intellectual answers to his questions which he desperately sought.

In this paper, I shall briefly explore Augustine's anti-intellectual environment and its characteristics—especially with regard to the North African clergy—and then discuss the significant effect this had in driving him into the arms of the Manichees.

1. North African Catholic Christianity

The atmosphere of North African Christendom in which Augustine grew up reflected the influential thought of Tertullian (d. ca. 220), the North African theologian of Carthage, who asked, "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?"[5] The Porch of Solomon, where Jesus would customarily teach, was sufficient for him. Tertullian then added, "I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic or a dialectic Christianity. After Jesus we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research." Although Tertullian did utilize Stoic philosophy, pre-Socratic philosophers, and even Aristotle (who studied at Plato's Academy in Athens, of all places!), his aversion to philosophy was no secret.[6] His fideistic comment, "I believe because it is foolish,"[7] was not merely idiosyncratic with Tertullian. He, along with his theological successor, Cyprian (who was slightly less strident than his "master's") exerted a powerful influence upon North African Christendom's anti-intellectualism.[8] Rather, it typified the anti-intellectual Christianity among the Catholic clergy of this entire region. For instance, Augustine addressed the council of bishops of the African Church in October of 393—an address preserved in his *Faith and the Creed*. Rather than utilize heavy theological language, he had to resort to very plain speech and followed the basic credal statements of Christianity—for high-ranking church officials![9] Later on in 412, Augustine received a letter from Consentius, a fellow bishop, who reflected this lack

of appreciation for the intellect: "God is not to be sought after by reason but followed through authority." [10]

Such narrow-mindedness and lack of theological and intellectual rigor are easier to understand when we consider the historical context of the North African Church. By necessity, Christians devoted their energies to enduring opposition and even martyrdom up until Constantine's conversion to Christianity and his making Christianity the official religion of the Empire. Although certainly no excuse for anti-intellectualism and avoiding philosophical questions, Christians had been understandably more concerned to gather together to pray and encourage one another than engage in scholarly discussion. But by the time of Augustine, Christians still had not devoted much time and energy to theological reflection or interaction with the intellectual ideas circulating around the Mediterranean region.

The lack of theological rigor had detrimental side-effects, one of which was the infiltration of Manichean beliefs into the Church. The Donatists would mock the African Catholic congregations because of the proliferation of Manichean heresies within them. Even Augustine mentioned a sub-deacon within the Catholic Church who had concurrently been a member of the Manichees for years. He aroused no one's suspicion.[11] Such a heretical presence within North African Catholicism was commonplace. John O'Meara elaborates:

Men could change their allegiance from Christianity to Manicheism—and vice versa—without attracting as much attention as they would if they had changed to the Donatists. It even happened that Christian ministers were, after many years' performance of their functions, discovered to have been Manichees all the time.[12]

The dearth of theological endeavor had yet another negative side-effect: authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism among North African Catholic clergy. Closed-mindedness seemed to be characteristic among these Church leaders. In *Of the Morals of the Catholic Church*, Augustine urges the "inquirer" who desires to find the truth not to despair when he encounters anti-intellectualism among the Church leadership:

And should the inquirer meet with some, whether bishops or presbyters, or any officials or ministers of the Catholic Church, who either avoid in all cases opening up mysteries, or, content with simple faith, have no desire for more recondite knowledge, he must not despair of finding the knowledge of the truth in a case where neither are all able to teach to whom the inquiry is addressed, nor are all inquirers worthy of learning the truth. Diligence and piety are both necessary: on the one hand, we must have knowledge to find truth, and on the other hand, we must deserve to get the knowledge.[13]

Augustine had once been a seeker in just this atmosphere—an authoritarian one in which church leaders offered questioners no reasoned answers but rather intimidated the laity to blindly accept Church teaching without question.[14] Eugene Teselle characterizes Augustine's conservative Catholic environment as stressing "reverence for divine authority at the expense of rational inquiry and may even have been inclined

to counsel blind faith." [15] So when the questions he was raising were not answered by the Catholic clergy, Augustine looked elsewhere for intellectual satisfaction.

2. Augustine's Own Disillusionment and Flight to the Manichees

Augustine, who lived near Tertullian's Carthage in Tagaste, said in *The Happy Life* that he was "led into error [errorem]" through a "childish superstition [superstitio]" which "frightened [terrebat] me from the search [for truth] itself." [16] This puerile superstition refers to the anti-intellectualism which pervaded the Church in Africa and demanded belief without offering any rational grounds for it. The word *superstitio* here has the sense of deterring from scrutiny and investigation. It was the shut-up-kid-and-just-believe mentality.

That this superstition refers to the anti-intellectual Christianity that surrounded him is made even clearer by the similar language used in *The Usefulness of Belief*. [17] Augustine wrote this piece six years after his conversion to Christianity, which occurred in 386. He sent it to Honoratus, whom he had converted to Manicheism: "I fell among these people for no other reason than that they declared that they would put aside all overawing [terribili] authority, and by pure and simple reason would bring to God those who were willing to listen to them and so deliver them from all error [errore]." [18] The Manichees had said that "we [Catholics] were overawed by superstition [superstitione terreri] and were bidden to believe rather than to reason, while they pressed no one to believe until the truth had been discussed and elucidated." Augustine was thus "enticed by these promises," being an adolescent "with a mind eager for truth." [19]

Augustine considered his mentally-stultifying experience with the North African *Catholica* to be like "clouds" or fog that confused his intellectual and spiritual course—clouds by which he was "led into error." [20] It was this "childish superstition" which stifled intellectual inquiry and moved him toward Manicheism—the religion of inquiring minds [21] and "the heresy of the intellectuals." [22] (In his *Order [De Ordine]*, Augustine himself gently rebukes Monica for her *superstitio*—for her simple-minded rejection of philosophy. He reminds her that Paul's warnings in *Colossians 2* are against a this-worldly philosophy, not against the true *philosophia* [the love of wisdom] of the other, intelligible world.) [23] Although Augustine was misguided by this Enlightenment-like ideal of pursuing pure reason, he preferred this route to that of blind submission to authority. Augustine's hunger for intellectual answers was not unreasonable or excessive.

The Catholicism with which Augustine had grown up commanded belief without lifting a finger to teach the believer or to answer the intellectual difficulties he might have. [24] Instead of a faith seeking understanding, Augustine's upbringing encouraged a blind faith which was told to suppress any inquiry. Peter Brown comments,

This African church was exceptionally narrow and conservative....The bishops were exceptionally sensitive to any challenge to their authority....This oppressive environment had always tended to produce extreme reactions among some African

Christians. A strong current of "new," of "spiritual" Christianity had always run against the massive literalism of the traditional church.[25]

Augustine found that these conservative Catholics tended to be suspicious of any believer who made intellectual or philosophical excursions outside the provincial, popularly-accepted beliefs.[26]

Augustine could not tolerate North African Catholicism's lack of sympathy for the serious questioner. Augustine offers a couple of examples, apparently from his own experience. First, the Catholici would typically resort to frivolous and mocking answers in response to the serious and reasonable question raised by the Manichees (and their Gnostic predecessors): "What did God do before he made heaven and earth?"[27] Unlike the Catholici, Augustine refused to evade "by a joke the force of the objection" by saying, "He was preparing hell...for those prying into such deep subjects." Augustine continues,

It is one thing to see the objection; it is another to make a joke of it. I do not answer in this way. I would rather respond, "I do not know," concerning what I do not know rather than say something for which a man inquiring about such profound matters is laughed at while the one giving a false answer is praised.

By contrast, Augustine is willing to respect the person who asks a serious question[28] even if it is asked in a challenging spirit.[29]

Another example of Catholic simple-mindedness is the response of an "utterly foolish" woman to a Manichean woman's praising of the sun as an object of worship:[30] "she leapt up in her excitement and stamped on the place on the floor illumined by the rays that came in through the window, exclaiming, 'Lo, I tread under foot the sun, your God.'"[32]

Not only did Augustine hear such anti-intellectual quips, he himself was in the thick of particular intellectual difficulties during his pilgrimage. Before Jerome's scholarly translation of the Latin Vulgate, the *Vetus Latina* was used by North African Christians. Full of slang and jargon,[32] it was a very crudely translated work which, according to Augustine, was "unworthy of comparison with the nobility of Cicero's writings" because of its "humble style." [33] Although Augustine indicates that his "swelling pride," the begetter of all sin,[34] prevented him from looking past this crude translation to the truth,[35] the sloppy scholarship behind the *Vetus Latina* created yet another barrier and reinforced the anti-intellectualism with which he had grown up.[36]

Then there were the particular questions Augustine grappled with—questions for which Catholic Christianity seemed to furnish no answers. Two of the chief questions he sought to resolve had to do with (a) the origin of evil and (b) God's corporeality (in which North African Catholics typically believed). "Ignorant in such matters, I was disturbed by these questions." [37] In particular, the question of the origin of evil so troubled and wearied him that he was "driven into the arms of heretics," as he wrote in *On Free Will*. [38] Augustine simply could not see that evil was not a bodily entity—a substance that possessed "its own foul and hideous mass" [39]—but was actually the

privation of goodness. Whatever has being is good insofar as it is, but evil, however, is the privation of being.

Regarding God's corporeality, Augustine was surrounded by this pervasive belief. Earlier on, Tertullian had borrowed from the Stoics the doctrine of the soul's corporeality as well as God's own corporeality.[40] In his mind, if an entity is not embodied, it is not real. Augustine himself could not think of God except as corporeal and spatial, "either infused into the world or even diffused outside the world throughout infinite space....For whatever I conceived as devoid of such spatial character seemed to me to be nothing, absolutely nothing, not even so much as empty space." [41] This, of course, logically entailed the belief that an elephant's body would receive more of God than a sparrow! [42]

Consequently, the Manichees would torment the North African Catholics with their questions on this subject as well: "Is God confined within a corporeal form? Does God have hair and nails?" [43] Augustine only later came to realize that being made in God's image did not imply that God had a body; rather he is a "spiritual substance." [44] Although Augustine subsequently realized that the Manichees themselves were hardly proceeding by pure reason and that they appealed to authority, they offered an attractive alternative to a religion which suppressed the life of the mind.

Through his encounter with Neoplatonist Christians in Milan (and Ambrose in particular), Augustine's erroneous belief in divine corporeality was corrected. In the language of Homer's *Odyssey* [45], Augustine describes in *The Happy Life* that his sea-faring brought him to a new "land": "here I came to know the North Star [either Ambrose or Neoplatonist Christianity] [46] to which I could entrust myself." [47] Augustine realized that "nothing bodily should be thought of at all when one thinks of God or when one thinks of the soul, for it is the one thing in reality closest to God." [48]

What is astonishing is that Augustine considered his move from the narrow-minded, intellectual "clouds" of North African Catholicism to the Manichees to be a "scatter[ing of] that fog." [49] Becoming a Manichee was an intellectual step forward for Augustine. [50] Shortly before he joined the Manichees, he was inspired to convert to a life of philosophy upon reading Cicero's *Hortensius* at nineteen years of age: "I was delighted with exhortation only because by its argument I was stirred up and enkindled and set aflame to love, and pursue, and attain and catch hold of, and strongly embrace...wisdom itself." [51] Once he had been "made more upright" (or "upstanding"), he concluded that he would rather yield to those who "teach" rather than those who "command." [52] In his youth, he found the "yoke" of the Catholic Church to be more oppressive than what the Manichees had to offer. Unlike the Catholic clergyman he had encountered, the Manichees did not demand belief without reason and without offering to teach and instruct the seeker. Augustine could now stand on his own intellectual feet rather than being weighed down by an anti-intellectual authoritarianism. Instead of suppressing reason and blindly accepting authoritative commands in infantile dependence, he could think for himself as a rational adult. [53] Robert O'Connell writes,

For they [i.e., the Manichees] took seriously, more seriously than any Catholic clergyman Augustine had previously met, those words of Christ: "Seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you." And factus erectior ["after having been made more upright"], Augustine is boldly claiming that, prompted to choose between Manicheanism and the Catholicism he had experienced, his conversion by these mercenarii was a step in the right direction![54]

So Augustine viewed his conversion to Manicheanism as a positive step—despite its gross errors which he later came to realize. When he read Cicero's Hortensius, Augustine, inspired to pursue a life of philosophy, viewed himself as the Prodigal of Luke 15 who was finally being awakened to "rise up" so that he might "return" to God: "I began to rise up, so that I might return to you." [55] Leaving his "superstitious" Catholicism behind was, remarkably, a move toward God rather than away from him. [56]

The Soliloquies says as much when Augustine addresses God: "Receive me, thy servant, now fleeing from these things, as they [i.e., the Manichees—God's 'enemies' whom he had 'served'] formerly received me, a stranger, when I was fleeing from thee." [57] Unlike the Catholics whom Augustine had known, the Manichees had treated Augustine with a far more "Christian" spirit—a treatment which shaped the next decade of his life. [58]

Conclusion

Eventually, Augustine as a converted Christian could maintain his faith "without being ashamed of it." [59] He also came to recognize that authority was not illegitimate per se. Augustine took the Septuagint's translation of Isa. 7:9 as his inspiration for explaining the relationship between faith and reason: nisi credideritis, non intellegetis—"unless you have believed, you will not understand." Vernon Bourke notes that Augustine came to realize that "there must be some starting points that are things accepted as true before reasoning can begin." [60] What was different upon his conversion to the thoughtful Neoplatonist Christianity of Ambrose in Milan was that Augustine was free to seek to understand—not blindly accept authority and ask no burning questions. His was now a faith—not an unwarranted leap—seeking understanding. And Augustine insisted on the latter just as much as he did on the former. [61]

Augustine's pilgrimage through the "scandal of the North African Catholic mind" is instructive for us today. It reminds us of the havoc that is wrought on future generations by an unthinking faith that is reinforced by Christian leadership. What Augustine experienced, Roland Teske suggests, "stands as a clear warning for the Church of today that the minds of some of the most intelligent young women and men can easily be driven from the Church by a similar anti-intellectualism." [62]

[1] Thanks to Fr. Roland Teske, S.J., for his inspiration of my study of this subject.

[2] (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 3.

[3] Ibid., 33-34.

[4] During the time of Augustine, North African Christianity was divided into two groups: the Catholics and the puristic Donatists.

[5] Prescription of Heretics. 7.9

[6] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (*The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1) (Chicago: University Press, 1971), 49-50. For instance, Tertullian writes about his belief in the soul's corporeality, "It is the Stoics I am speaking of, who will easily prove that the soul is a body, even though they almost agree with us in saying that the soul is a spirit" (*On the Soul* 5.2). Again, "Nothing lacks bodily existence but that which is non-existent" (*On the Flesh of Christ* 11).

[7] *Credibile est, quia ineptum est* (*On the Flesh of Christ* 5.4). In chapter 4, Tertullian indicates that if we "judge God by our conceptions," the Incarnation and the crucifixion of Christ will appear foolish. Although Tertullian is not necessarily arguing for the glories of irrationality, he has been understood—and not by accident—to have a dislike for philosophy (Roland Teske, *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine* [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1996], 70n).

[8] Robert J. O'Connell, "The Riddle of Augustine's 'Confessions': A Plotinian Key," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1964): 343 and note.

[9] *Ibid.*, 69n.

[10] Cited in Eugene Teselle, *Augustine the Theologian* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 27.

[11] Epistles 236.1-3. For further discussion, see W.H.C. Frend, "The Gnostic-Manichaean Tradition in Roman North Africa," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 4 (1953): 22-23.

[12] John J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine: An Introduction to the Confessions of St. Augustine* 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1980), 63.

[13] *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* 1.1.

[14] Robert J. O'Connell, *Images of Conversion in St. Augustine's Confessions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 101.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] *The Happy Life* 4 and attendant endnote, unpublished translation by Roland Teske.

[17] Pierre Courcelle makes this connection in *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Boccard, 1968), 272-3.

[18] *The Usefulness of Reason* I.2.

[19] Ibid.

[20] The Happy Life 4.

[21] Frend, "The Gnostic-Manichaean Tradition," 23.

[22] Robert J. O'Connell, *Augustine's Theory of Man, A.D. 386-391* (Harvard: University Press, 1968), 233.

[23] Order 1.22-33, where Monica rebukes Licentius, Augustine's pupil, who is bellowing Psalm 79 in the darkness of an outhouse! The ensuing discussion reveals that Monica is unwilling to venture beyond her simple but "superstitious" faith toward understanding. See O'Connell's comments in *Augustine's Theory of Man*, 228-9, 233.

[24] Robert J. O'Connell, S.J., "On Augustine's 'First Conversion' Factus Erectior (De Beata Vita 4)," *Augustinian Studies* 17 (1986): 16.

[25] Peter Brown, 42-43.

[26] Robert J. O'Connell, *St. Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of the Soul*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), 19.

[27] *Confessions*, 11.12.14.

[28] James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions III: Commentary on Books 8-13* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 275. See also, Robert J. O'Connell, *St. Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of the Soul*, 19n. Another instance of this kind of joking answer is found in *The City of God* (7.1.), where Augustine is discussing what a questioner, based on Marcus Varro's writing, might ask—namely, that perhaps certain select and outstanding gods deserve to be worshiped. Rather than sarcastically assert what Tertullian said—"If some gods are selected, like onions, then certainly the rest are judged unfit," Augustine believes that the idea of "select gods" in itself is not unreasonable, given the vantage point of the inquirer. The same type of selection, Augustine adds, is done in an army or within the church—without "judging unfit" those who are not selected to lead. Augustine concludes, Hence the fact that certain gods were selected out of many does not mean that we should denounce either writer concerned, or the worshipers of those gods, or the gods themselves. [In *Against the Nations* 2.9, Tertullian sarcastically discusses the division of Roman gods into "certain," "uncertain," and "select."] Instead, we should notice who these select gods are, and for what purpose they seem to have been selected.

[29] O'Connell, *Images of Conversion*, 173.

[30] Augustine writes in *On Free Will* that "some people [the Manichees], greatly erring, venerate light as if it were the substance of God most high" (3.16).

[31] *The Usefulness of Belief* 6.13.

- [32] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (New York: Dorset Press, 1967), 42.
- [33] *Confessions* 3.5.9. See also *The Usefulness of Belief* 6.13.
- [34] James J. O'Connell, *Augustine: Confessions II: Commentary on Books 1-7* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 170.
- [35] *Confessions* 3.5.9.
- [36] Gillian Clark, *Augustine: The Confessions* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 9-10.
- [37] *Confessions* 3.7.12.
- [38] *On Free Will* 1.2.4.
- [39] *Confessions* 5.10.20.
- [40] *On the Soul* 5.2.
- [41] *Confessions* 7.1.1.
- [42] *Ibid.*, 7.1.2.
- [43] *Confessions* 3.7.12.
- [44] *Confessions* 6.3.4.
- [45] Robert J. O'Connell, *Images of Conversion in St. Augustine's Confessions*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 7.
- [46] Teske makes this observation in a footnote in *The Happy Life*, 20n.
- [47] *The Happy Life* 4.
- [48] *Ibid.*
- [49] *The Happy Life* 4.
- [50] O'Connell, *Images of Conversion*, 83n.
- [51] *Confessions* 3.4.8.
- [52] *Ibid.*
- [53] O'Connell, *Images of Conversion*, 8, 49.
- [54] "On Augustine's 'First Conversion,'" 28. O'Connell comments: "We must not forget that [Augustine] could, and almost certainly did, feel that in adopting Manichaeism he

was not apostasizing from, but actually adopting, a purer, more 'spiritual' form of Christianity than he had found in the North African Catholica of his day" (Images of Conversion, 48).

[55] Confessions 3.4.7: surgere coeperam ut ad te redirem. Utilizing Plotinian language, Augustine alludes to the prodigal son, who arises and returns to his father (see 1.18.28) (Cp. Gillian Clark, ed., Augustine's Confessions Books I-IV [Cambridge: University Press, 1995], 113-4, 144.)

[56] O'Connell, Images of Conversion, 52.

[57] Soliloquies 1.5.

[58] O'Connell, Images of Conversion, 53.

[59] Confessions 5.14.24.

[60] Vernon J. Bourke, Augustine's Love of Wisdom: An Introspective Philosophy (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1992), 21.

[61] Robert J. O'Connell, Soundings in St. Augustine's Imagination (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 216.

[62] Roland Teske, Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine, 12.