

Augustine and Medieval Theology: A Review

Charles St-Onge, April 27, 2001

In his book, **The Growth of Medieval Theology**, Jaroslav Pelikan seeks not only to explore the development of doctrine in the Middle Ages but also to trace the impact Augustine's thinking had on that development. His thesis is that "It was principally Augustine...upon whom the seventh and eighth – as well as the ninth and those that followed – drew for their understanding of church doctrine." (Pelikan, 16) Certainly Augustine's thinking had a profound impact on the great churchmen of the beginning and end of the Middle Ages – Gregory the Great and Thomas Aquinas. He also profoundly shaped the western church's thinking on at the doctrines of God and of grace. However, he seemed to raise more questions than he answered regarding the Eucharist, and he left others to develop a true doctrine of the atonement.

Hardly a single theologian of significance in the Middle Ages did not at least quote Augustine – either in defense of his arguments or to refute Augustine's position. Gregory the Great himself, one of "the most widely read of the Western church fathers," (Pelikan, 16) was essentially a synthesizer of Augustine's thought. The Venerable Bede considered it necessary in any exegetical work to quote "the blessed Augustine" as did John Scotus Erigena and many others. (Pelikan, 25, 97) Both Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas, almost 700 years after Gregory the Great, relied heavily on Augustine's work. Bonaventure writes of "Augustine's opinion, which is to be believed", and Thomas Aquinas concludes his discussion of predestination with Augustine's own summary of the same matter. (Pelikan, 271, 277)

Augustine's work, "On The Trinity," shaped the direction of thought on the doctrine of God throughout the Middle Ages. His prominence in this area of theology can especially be seen in the western church's defense of the filioque. There is a sense in which the east's attack on this doctrine was seen as an attack on Augustine himself. (Pelikan, 21) Aquinas appropriated Augustine's understanding of the Trinity in his "Summa Theologiae". In fact, this Augustinian understanding of the Trinity was the key to Aquinas' whole system of theology. (Pelikan, 279) Bonaventure, writing at the same time as Augustine, further developed the psychological analogies for the Trinity that Augustine himself had developed. Bonaventure posited a "trinitarian ontology", a threeness present in the created order as a reflection of God's own nature (Pelikan, 283).

Augustine's writings were used in Hincmar of Reims battle against Gottschalk's theology of a "trine deity." Gottschalk seemed to be suggesting that "each person of the Trinity has its own deity and divinity," which would then avoid the implication that the whole divinity took on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. To prove this he quoted Augustine, who occasionally used the term "trine deity." But Hincmar of Reims used Alcuin's compilation of Augustine's work on the Trinity to refute this improper reading of the father as well as Gottschalk's dangerous theology. (Pelikan, 59,61) Those in Spain who were attempting to revive a form of adoptionism also tried to use Augustine to defend their position, but their opponents used Augustine to defend their own orthodox position. (Pelikan, 65, 66) These debates themselves served to highlight that Augustine's views, long considered determinative in and of themselves, might indeed need to be explained and given an orthodox interpretation.

Augustine's understanding of grace and God's predestination of the elect was at the center of a number of controversial dialogues in the Medieval period. His strong view of predestination was too much for many theologians, which is why the Synod of Orange in 553 already "tempered" his views. Indeed, on the issue of predestination "what was embarrassing about Augustine was his clarity." (Pelikan, 81) Medieval theologians such as Gottschalk found themselves the center of controversy when they adopted pure Augustinian views of predestination. Ratramnus himself, the chief opponent of Radbertus on the issue of the Eucharist, supported Gottschalk in his defense of an Augustinian theology of election. At issue was the tendency for strict Augustinians to adopt a view of atonement as "limited" in some sense to those

already predestined by God. The opponents of the Augustinian predestinarians used Augustine's own views on grace in their support (Pelikan, 82). This debate would continue into the time of the Reformation.

On the issue of the Eucharist, especially in the development of the doctrine of the Real Presence, Augustine was used again by both sides. In fact, the proponents of a figurative or symbolic presence seemed to have Augustine most clearly on their side. Those who were fighting for a literal interpretation of the words of institution realized that "the origin of almost the entire scandal seems to have come from Saint Augustine." (Pelikan, 218) One statement of Augustine that was most troubling to the supporters of the Real Presence was "Why are you preparing your teeth and your stomach? Believe, and you have already eaten." (Pelikan, 219) But other statements from Augustine seemed to support the Real Presence. The Eucharist became one area of theology where other western fathers, such as Ambrose, were relied on for proof as much as Augustine (Pelikan, 80).

It was in the development of the doctrine of the atonement that the medieval period went furthest beyond the Augustine synthesis. A proper understanding of Christ's atonement seemed to be the missing piece that made a more solid doctrine of the Eucharist, of grace, and of predestination possible. Augustine himself had never clearly posited an understanding of Christ's redemptive work, which seemed to make it possible for others to misunderstand his meaning on those other theological issues. Anselm of Canterbury's work, **Cur Deus Homo**, became the definitive book for the later Middle Ages on the atonement (Pelikan, 142). In it he showed how only a God-man could satisfy divine justice by being a perfect sacrifice on the part of man to God. This new understanding of Christology and soteriology filled in many blanks left by the synthesis of Augustine's teaching, making possible a more decisive understanding of the communication of grace, and therefore of the Eucharist and of predestination (Pelikan, 159).

The growing use of reason and natural theology in the later Middle Ages also had its roots in Augustine's thinking and work. It was Augustine's use of psychological and natural parallels for the Trinity that spurred other theologians to find God in nature. Bonaventure wrote: "Since every science...is concerned with the Trinity above all else, every science must necessarily present some trace of this same Trinity." (Pelikan, 282) Thomas Aquinas used Augustine's relation of nature to grace to support some of his theological methodologies. "Since grace does not abolish nature, but completes it," he argues, "then natural reason should minister to faith." (Pelikan, 285)

Augustine, then, did have a profound influence on the thought of theologians in the Middle Ages. His work on predestination opened as many doors as it provided answers. His own thinking on the Trinity not only influenced later clarification of this doctrine, but also paved the way for more work in the area of natural theology. Where Augustine's doctrines were unclear, later theologians had to continue reconciling his work with that of the other western fathers, some of the eastern fathers, and the Scriptures. His influence extended to popes and great theologians for over a thousand years. In short, Augustine's writings shaped the church catholic in the west perhaps as profoundly as any of the apostolic writers.

Bibliography

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