

AUGUSTINE AND THE SCANDAL OF THE NORTH AFRICAN CATHOLIC MIND

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Four years ago Mark Noll wrote a landmark book entitled *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.¹ He 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 noted, 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 Avenue³—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 Augustine (b. AD 354). In this case it was the scandal of the North African Catholic mind—a scandal that pushed him toward the Manichees, a Christian fringe group. During Augustine's day North African *Catholica* were closeminded 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 that he so desperately sought.

In this paper I shall briefly explore Augustine's antiintellectual 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.

I. NORTH AFRICAN CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

The atmosphere of North African Christendom in which Augustine grew up reflected the influential thought of Tertullian (d. ca. 220), 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."

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¹ M. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.* 33–34.

⁴ Before 411, North African Christianity was divided into two groups: the Catholics and the puristic Donatists. After 411 Donatist churches were pretty well suppressed.

⁵ Augustine *Prescription of Heretics* 7.9.

Although Tertullian did utilize stoic philosophy, pre-Socratic philosophers, and even Aristotle (who studied at Plato's academy in Athens, which apparently had more to do with Jerusalem than Tertullian let on), his aversion to philosophy was no secret.⁶ His fideistic comment, "I believe because it is foolish,"⁷ was not merely idiosyncratic with Tertullian. Along with his theological successor Cyprian, who was slightly less strident than his master, Tertullian exerted a powerful influence upon North African Christendom's antiintellectualism.⁸ Such a remark by Tertullian typified the antiintellectual 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 follow the basic creedal statements of Christianity even for high-ranking church officials.⁹ 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. 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 subdeacon 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 pres-

⁶ J. Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971) 1.49–50. 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* (Tertullian *Flesh* 5.4). In chap. 4 Tertullian indicates that if we "judge God by our conceptions" the incarnation and 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 (R. Teske, *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine* [Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1996] 70).

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

⁹ *Ibid.* 69.

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

¹¹ Augustine *Epistles* 236.1–3. For further discussion see W. H. C. Frend, "The Gnostic-Manichaean Tradition in Roman North Africa," *JEH* 4 (1953) 22–23.

ence 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 antiintellectualism among North African Catholic clergy. Closemindedness seemed to be characteristic among these Church leaders. Augustine urges the inquirer who desires to find the truth not to despair when he encounters antiintellectualism 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 perhaps even "inclined to counsel blind faith."¹⁵ So when the questions Augustine was raising were not answered by the Catholic clergy he looked elsewhere for intellectual satisfaction.

II. AUGUSTINE'S DISILLUSIONMENT AND FLIGHT TO THE MANICHEES

Augustine said that he was "led into error" through a "childish superstition (*superstitio*)" that "frightened me from the search [for truth] itself."¹⁶ This puerile *superstitio* refers to the antiintellectualism that 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.

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

¹³ Augustine *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* 1.1.

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

¹⁵ Teselle, *Augustine*.

¹⁶ Augustine *The Happy Life* 4 (unpublished translation by R. Teske, to which I hereafter refer).

That this superstition refers to the antiintellectual 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 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."¹⁸ The Manichees had said that "we [Catholics] were overawed by superstition 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" that stifled intellectual inquiry and moved him toward Manicheism—the religion of inquiring minds²¹ and "the heresy of the intellectuals."²²

Augustine gently rebuked Monica for her *superstitio*, her simple-minded rejection of philosophy. He reminded 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 the Enlightenment-like ideal of pursuing pure reason, he preferred this route to that of blind submission to authority. His hunger for intellectual answers was not unreasonable or excessive. After all, 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 that 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

¹⁷ P. Courcelle makes this connection in *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Boccard, 1968) 272–273.

¹⁸ Augustine *The Usefulness of Belief* 1.2 (cited from J. H. S. Burleigh, *Augustine: Earlier Writings* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953]).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Augustine *Happy Life* 4.

²¹ Frend, "Tradition" 23.

²² R. J. O'Connell, *Augustine's Theory of Man: A.D. 386–391* (Harvard: Harvard University, 1968) 233.

²³ Augustine *Order* 1.22–33, where Monica rebukes Augustine's pupil Licentius 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, *Theory* 228–229, 233.

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

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. He offers a couple of examples, apparently from his own experience. First, the *Catholica* 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 *Catholica*, 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 question²⁸ 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.’”³¹

Augustine not only heard such antiintellectual quips but also was in the thick of particular intellectual difficulties during his pilgrimage. Before Jerome’s scholarly translation of the Vg, the VL was used by North African

²⁵ P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (New York: Dorset, 1967) 42–43.

²⁶ R. J. O’Connell, *St. Augustine’s Confessions: The Odyssey of the Soul* (2d ed.; New York: Fordham University, 1989) 19.

²⁷ Augustine *Confessions* 11.12.14.

²⁸ J. J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions III: Commentary on Books 8–13* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 275. See also O’Connell, *Odyssey* 19. Another instance of this kind of joking answer is found in Augustine *The City of God* (Harvard: Harvard University, 1963) 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, he adds, is done in an army or within the Church, without judging unfit those who are not elected 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. Instead, we should notice who these select gods are, and for what purpose they seem to have been selected.” Tertullian *Against the Nations* 2.9 sarcastically discusses the division of Roman gods into “certain,” “uncertain” and “select.”

²⁹ O’Connell, *Images* 173.

³⁰ Augustine *On Free Will* 3.16: “Some people [the Manichees], greatly erring, venerate light as if it were the substance of God most high.”

³¹ Augustine *Usefulness* 6.13.

Christians. Full of slang and jargon,³² it was a very crudely translated work that, 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 VL 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 (1) the origin of evil and (2) 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.”³⁸ He 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. 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. Until the North African Church could extricate itself from this doctrine she could never begin to think correctly about God. For instance, if someone thinks that all reality is corporeal, then the Father’s generation of the Son is going to be viewed along the lines of human sexual generation rather than in a noncorporeal or spiritual sense, as the neo-Platonists argued. This stoic corporealism had permeated the western Church until Augustine, through the help of his Milanese neo-Platonist friends, finally responded to it with vigor.

Before his contact with the neo-Platonist Christians, 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

³² Brown, *Augustine* 42.

³³ Augustine *Confessions* 3.5.9. See also *Usefulness* 6.13.

³⁴ J. J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions II: Commentary on Books 1–7* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 170.

³⁵ Augustine *Confessions* 3.5.9.

³⁶ G. Clark, *Augustine: The Confessions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1993) 9.

³⁷ Augustine *Confessions* 3.7.12.

³⁸ Augustine *On Free Will* 1.2.4.

³⁹ Augustine *Confessions* 5.10.20.

⁴⁰ Augustine *On the Soul* 5.2.

⁴¹ Augustine *Confessions* 7.1.1.

⁴² *Ibid.* 7.1.2.

Consequently the Manichees would torment the North African *Catholica* 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 that suppressed the life of the mind.

Through his encounter with neo-Platonist 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 how his seafaring brought him to a new "land": "Here I came to know the North Star [either Ambrose or neo-Platonist 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" 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 clergymen 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 antiintellectual 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 [the Manichees] took seriously, more seriously than any Catholic clergyman Augustine had previously met, those words of Christ: "Seek, and you shall

⁴³ Ibid. 3.7.12.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 6.3.4.

⁴⁵ O'Connell, *Images* 7.

⁴⁶ Cf. Teske, *Happy Life* 20.

⁴⁷ Augustine *Happy Life* 4.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ O'Connell, *Images* 83.

⁵¹ Augustine *Confessions* 3.4.8.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ O'Connell, *Images* 8, 49.

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 Manicheism 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 Manicheism 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 son of Luke 15 who was finally being awakened to “rise up” so that he might “return” to God.⁵⁵ Leaving his superstitious Catholicism behind was, remarkably, a move toward God rather than away from him.⁵⁶

Augustine addresses God as follows: “Receive me, thy servant, now fleeing from these things, as they [the Manichees—God’s ‘enemies’ whom he had ‘served’] formerly received me, a stranger, when I was fleeing from thee.”⁵⁷ Unlike the Catholics Augustine had known, the Manichees had treated him with a far more Christian spirit—a treatment that shaped the next decade of his life.⁵⁸

III. 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. He took the LXX translation of Isa 7:9 as his inspiration for explaining the relationship between faith and reason: “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 neo-Platonist Christianity of Ambrose in Milan was that Augustine was free to seek to understand rather than to blindly accept authority and ask no burning questions. His was now a faith seeking understanding, not an unwarranted leap. And Augustine insisted on the former just as much as he did on the latter.⁶¹

Augustine’s pilgrimage through the scandal of the North African Catholic mind is instructive for us today. Christian leaders ought to take seriously his example. What Paul said about the Israelites could be said of

⁵⁴ O’Connell, “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* 48).

⁵⁵ Augustine *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).

⁵⁶ O’Connell, *Images* 52.

⁵⁷ Augustine *Soliloquies* 1.5.

⁵⁸ O’Connell, *Images* 53.

⁵⁹ Augustine *Confessions* 5.14.24.

⁶⁰ V. J. Bourke, *Augustine’s Love of Wisdom: An Introspective Philosophy* (West Lafayette: Purdue University, 1992) 21.

⁶¹ R. J. O’Connell, *Soundings in St. Augustine’s Imagination* (New York: Fordham University, 1994) 216.

Augustine's experience: "These things happened as examples for us" (1 Cor 10:6). Rather than reduplicate the blind faith of North African Christendom, these leaders must encourage their congregations to honor God by loving him with all their minds, thus enabling them to pass on a thoughtful faith to the next generation as well as challenging the surrounding culture's erroneous ideas.⁶² Frances Ridley Havergal's hymn "Take My Life" contains a stanza that, unfortunately but tellingly, seems to go unsung in our churches today: "Take my intellect and use / Every power as Thou shalt choose."

Augustine's example 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."⁶³

⁶² In this regard see J. P. Moreland, "Philosophical Apologetics, the Church, and Contemporary Culture," *JETS* 39 (March 1996) 123–140.

⁶³ R. Teske, *Paradoxes* 12. I am grateful to Father Teske for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.