

Late medieval Augustinianism – A critical reassessment

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by

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There is probably no theologian in the Middle Ages who does not quote Augustine or who cannot be related to Augustine. The incredible scope of his writings, as well as the length of this era opens up a world of ideas that cannot be adequately considered by a single person. While we cannot claim a unity within the work of Augustine, we also cannot declare a unity in the reception of his work in this period between late antiquity and early modern times.

What played a major role in this reception was not so much Augustine's original work as its mediation within the tradition of the Holy Church. For the medieval theologian had not a critical edition of the collected works of Augustine available; rather, he depended on phrases, quotations, readings from collections and anecdotes and legends about Augustine. There is not a specific genre to mediate Augustine's works, but we will find a larger number of quotes and references within certain texts like florilegia, textbooks, commentaries, and readings for church and meditation. Importantly, the guiding principle is not the authentic Augustine, but rather a phrase carrying his authority in a certain theological or spiritual context. We have to face the fact that there is no modern systematic treatment of the African church father. There might be some particular foci, but a systematic description of a certain phase in his life, certain works, or systematic topics cannot be provided. The study medieval Augustinianism is still dominated by a number of different approaches, differing greatly in their questions, methods, and answers regarding how Augustine's work was received. Thus, a number of questions must be addressed:

What is a quote? How is it limited: formally, with its content, its inner coherence? How can we find all these references in a time where quotation marks and references are not used? How can a comparison be made? Do we rely on statistical reports? We have to deal with these questions first before we look more closely to a via augustini in the medieval time.

1.1 *Persons and Institutions*

1.1.1 Peter Lombard

Although we can find traces of Augustine in nearly every work of the medieval period, there are some specific points of reception. First, we must name Peter Lombard. His book of sentences takes nearly 90% of its content from Augustine. When, in subsequent work, a theologian had to comment on Peter's Sentences, they had to deal with Augustine. Thus, theological education throughout the centuries was dominated by Augustine, even if not the authentic one.

1.1.2 Decretum Gratiani

Another major source of Augustinian sentences was the collection of iudicial sources, so-called because of their legendary origin in an order of Pope Gratian called the Decretum Gratiani. This collection of sources is characterized by a long list of authorities from the Early Church, and among them, Augustine is probably one of the most quoted. As this source book was used extensively throughout the Middle Ages, Augustine became known very widely and probably in a context where one would not expect his notion.

1.1.3 Readings and collections

A third genre with collected sentences and quotations of Augustine were textbooks written for the purpose of readings during meals in convents and monasteries. Such books contained texts essential for the development of spiritual praxis, discipleship, transformation according to the model of Christ, or other subjects of religious life and spirituality.

Aside from these major loci of Augustinian reading and his mediation into various contexts, we have to look for a great variety of texts quoting

Augustine and his works. Even though research has been intensified over the past few decades with a large number of detailed studies on singular fathers or works and their reception in the Middle Ages, a comprehensive survey has yet to be formulated.

1.2 What Augustine?

1.2.1 Reception as a subject of Historical Theology

Within Historical theology the interest of research shifted from a more general view of trying to get the whole Augustine and its reception into focus to a detailed analysis of singular books and tracts of the African and their reception in western Theology. It became obvious that that approach was inadequate. What was referenced was not a particular book, but singular phrase of highly different origins, not only from different phases of Augustine's biography but also of several pseudepigraphic and anonymous writings that were simply claimed to be Augustinian. Nevertheless, the question of which phase of Augustine's life is more in the spotlight of a particular reception should not be omitted from the agenda of historical research.

The method asking for the theology of Augustine is significantly endangered, for the historical reconstruction of Augustine's biography with regard to his writings is rooted in nineteenth and twentieth century presuppositions of research. Thus, it is not completely free from systematic prejudices or questions arising out of a desire to solve more contemporary problems. In other words: to reconstruct Augustine and his work objectively and free from contemporary interest is simply impossible. We have to reflect on this problem hermeneutically in a postmodern horizon.

Other analysis of the reception of Augustine is impacted by confessional or ecclesiastical interests: Protestants look for the antipelagian Augustine regard those theologians who read him as such as forerunners of the Reformation. Catholic research, however, accentuates the reception of Augustine with regard to his ecclesiological writings and spiritual administration of the Church.

A new question came into the fore when research looked for Augustine's impact on the development of biblical interpretation and the hermeneutic of allegory. Scholars could free themselves from the confessional limitations of research. Many works on the spirituality of Augustine and his heirs in the Middle Ages nevertheless repeat the prejudices of previous controversies, reflecting the ongoing conflict between the Christian denominations. Finally the critical interpretations of Kurt Flasch and others, looking at the Church Fathers from the secular perspective of the History of Ideas, provoked much dispute about Augustine's understanding of original sin and its consequences for the development of theology in later centuries. Probably because of this dispute, Flasch's interpretation did not bear fruit for a more detailed and thorough interpretation of the reception of Augustine in medieval philosophy and theology.

1.2.2 Augustine as guardian of catholic orthodoxy

Results of most recent historical research seem to confirm these concerns. For the most part, Augustine was essentially seen and referenced as the representative of western theology with regard to its unifying power within the Catholic Church. He was the Authority by whom to determine catholic orthodoxy. His Sentences were interpreted as coming from a united system of theology which allows one to answer any question. Thus, his work became some kind of biblically based, theologically reflective and church-approved encyclopedia for requests of any kind.

The unity of Augustine's theology is emphasized in various contexts and dimensions. For many if not all medieval authors, Augustine represented the full content of western Theology. He guaranteed the whole of theological knowledge. Likewise, his writings described the boundaries of the theological enterprise. Orthodoxy beyond Augustine is impossible. Thus, Augustine functions also as a protector of catholic faith. His controversies with Donatists, Manicheans, Pelagius and his disciples, etc., become a model for further conflict and the fight for catholic truth. Augustine himself becomes a model for the apologetic soldier in the battle for Christian truth and becomes the representative of Christian Theology in general. This finds additional support

in the legendary record of his own life, which, as reflected in his own writings, e.g., the *Confessions*, was a model for the sinner who receives the grace of God and becomes his elected instrument to communicate the message of the Gospel and the revelation of God's mercy.

Within the increasingly differentiated and complex interpretations of Augustine since the thirteenth century, conflict arises about the legitimized, orthodox-approved, catholic reception of the church father's work. Augustine becomes the figurehead of rival parties and factions within the realm of western theology. Simply reading Augustine is no longer adequate. His writings need interpretation. That demands a superior authority outside his own writings to determine what constitutes a correct or incorrect interpretation. In this context we find more claims of „Augustinus totus noster est“ as in previous times. Consequently, the search for an interpretive authority becomes more urgent. It partially merges with the scholastic understanding of papacy as performed by Innocence III and his successors. Theologians of the mendicant orders especially contribute to these discussions and take Augustine exclusively as the legitimizing authority for their particular assertions.

The different phases of Augustine's biography were known in the Middle Ages. That should allow one to distinguish the contexts of his particular writings, even though this more differentiated view to the books, tracts, and sermons of Augustine cannot be verified in medieval writings. Medieval authors see the unity of Augustine's theology as portrayed in his books as signifying the unity of catholic theology. Thus, references to his antidonatist tracts can be combined with antipelagian, pastoral, ecclesiastical or biographical notions. Since the 13th century one may find certain writings that refer to a systematic or biographical center e.g. the antipelagian writings, Augustine's ecclesiastical tracts, or his letters. We'll have to come back to that.

1.3 Quote, citation, paraphrase, motive

Next to the question of which Augustine was received, more recent research has focused on the *process* of reception. First of all, as we discussed at the beginning, we have to look for the transmission. Since we do not have a critical edition of Augustine in the Middle Ages, the historian has to answer a

very important question when he talks about a quote or paraphrase, when he explores motives and key words or a certain parallels to Augustine's original statements, namely, "What makes a quote?" Need we appropriate some quantitative method like ascertaining the number of similar words? Does a quote require formal identifiers like quotation marks or particular sentence structure? Do we need references? Looking more closely at the study of Augustinian sentences we have to admit that distinctions between quote, citation, paraphrase, or key words are not evident at all. Many of the "quotes" that have been explored in the last year by using highly elaborated statistics basing on variously compiled databases do not relate to the reading of authentic texts. Sometimes they are just popular phrases, liturgical elements, rhymes or quotes from daily life situations that go back – with varying degrees of certainty – to the Father of Western Theology.

This problem is revealed especially by a thorough search for motives. It is very difficult to isolate a certain theological motive from its context and look for it in later texts. Within the variety of Augustinian sentences in various contexts (liturgy, teaching, reading, meditation, etc.), it is hardly possible to come to a definitive conclusion, not the least because and interpretation of motive can vary depending on its original context as juxtaposed with the context of its transmission. Thus, its original meaning – if that can ever be asserted – fades and with it its original intention and function. The same is true regarding certain series of motives, arguments, etc.

We have mentioned fairly often the authentic or original intention of a saying by Augustine. It is not possible to reconstruct Augustine's original intentions and with that the authentic meaning of a sentence. We cannot, in the end, determine the accuracy of our interpretation of medieval reception of Augustine. Historical Theology - the history of ideas - and its hermeneutic have to take account of the claims of the postmodern theory of science and its understanding of hermeneutics. Positivist understanding of evidential sources is impossible. Lessing's "ugly gap" between historical truth and general conclusions has to be taken with all seriousness.

1.4 *Method and Hermeneutics*

What methods and hermeneutics are required in the horizon of these results and even more questions? First of all we have to collect evidence from critically edited sources, such as quotations clearly identified as Augustine's, either because of their formal structure (quotation marks or formulations) or as longer sentences have been quoted from a certain authentic text. Next we have to search for motives, thoughts, and elements which can, without question, be related back to Augustine. Further evidence can be found in phrases like „as Augustine says ...“. Finally we should not overlook passages where Augustine stands as Father of Theology, teacher, priest, minister, bishop etc. These are – despite their questionable historicity – important elements of medieval identification with the heritage of Augustine. We will come to that in a moment.

The next step should be the thorough analysis of the context in which these quotations are situated. One might first test hypotheses with regard to the function of these elements within the whole of the argument, as well as the context of the discourse in which Augustine becomes important.

As a third step, we might search for the structure of reception in particular and in comparison to other such structures, either similar elements or similar temporary, systematic, or even literary contexts. Parallels can be found in repeated phrases, motives, and structures or focus on systematic issues which continuously return within debates or arguments. Finally we might find genres of literature which lend validity to sentences as Augustinian.

Only when this is done might we start to negotiate certain structures which allow us to speak of a certain reception of Augustine or one of his works. Although a lot of work had been done we are far away to conclude these questions with satisfying answers.

Most recent research on *auctoritas patrum* seems to stuck on certain contradictory questions. One might be caused by a certain positivistic trust in electronically developed and secured databases which compare medieval texts with modern critical editions. Quite bluntly, I would say that those operations

do not make sense. How would we suppose that a medieval religious figure in his monastery really tries to figure out a critical version of Augustine's interpretation in such and such a passage? Medieval theologians do not quote correctly. Thus we have to be extremely carefully to verify the reception of Augustine's work on the basis of modern editions and their digitalized versions. Likewise, I reject certain systematic reconstructions of "a" or "the" theological system of Augustine or his medieval heirs. Much more than an introduction to Augustine, we need thorough and detailed historical information about the situation and context in which Augustine developed a certain motive, thought, or sentence. This can be compared with even detailed and subtle information about the reception of these elements in medieval history of thought.

Augustine served during the Middle ages until Luther's time as seal of catholic orthodoxy. Because the context of Augustine's work is so essentially different from the situation in which he has been received over time, we have to acknowledge a growing disparity between his original intentions and the intentions of his readers and commentators. The question is not so much *what* is received from Augustine. The question is much more *how* something is received and related back to Augustine's and *why*. This being said, the question whether the reception of a certain antipelagian Augustine provoked the reformation development seems obsolete.