

St. Augustine's Conversion

"In every era there are certain great personalities who leave their mark on the history and culture of mankind – men who personally influence the ways in which their contemporaries think, act live and die. Perhaps Ghandi and Schweitzer are such in the twentieth century. How long their fame and example will last, no one knows. We do know a man who lived more than fifteen hundred years ago, the Catholic bishop of a small town in North Africa, who set an inspiring example for his period and who in every subsequent century has continued to spark the fire of Christian culture and indeed of Western civilization. This man is St. Augustine of Hippo." (Vernon J. Bourke, author of Augustine's Quest for Wisdom)¹

The popularity of St. Augustine's *Confessions* is perhaps due to the fact that the warts and wrinkles are fully in place. According to Professor Sally McFague, Dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School, "He is like the folks in the parables, one of us: lustful, ambitious, skeptical, gluttonous and petty. And in the midst of this realistic story, he traces the surprising ways of God, disrupting, subverting, and finally overturning his little world."² As a result of this remarkable popularity, perhaps more has been written about St. Augustine's conversion than that of anyone else, including St. Paul.³

¹ Saint Augustine, The Confessions of St. Augustine, Trans. Rex Warner (New York: Mentor-Omega Books, 1963), vii

² Sallie McFague, Conversion: Life on the Edge of the Raft, in *Interpretation* 32.03, (ATLA Serials 2001), 262

³ Robert A. Markus, Conversion and disenchantment in Augustine's Spiritual Career, (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1989), 1

Conversion can mean two things: an abrupt change to a religious attitude, accompanied by a highly emotional experience, or passing over from one perspective of reality to another. Sometimes it may be understood as bringing comfort, a change from a lost and godless state to a god-filled, peaceful condition where one's life is put in order, and where the before and after pictures are a life of disarray and sin on the one hand and peace and stability on the other.⁴

However, according to McFague, "...the great conversions – those of such saints of the church as Paul, Augustine, John Woolman, and Dorothy Day – bring not comfort, at least not in any superficial sense, but demand a courage, a willingness to risk and suffer, to live lives of dis-ease and spiritual adventure that is unsettling if not terrifying to contemplate."⁵ Moreover, she goes on to point out that conversion will necessarily not be a momentary or abrupt experience; but in the main, usually a painful and life-long process, fraught with doubt, ambiguity, great discomfort, and risk, and will demand courage to a high degree.⁶

Certainly, this would appear to be the case with St. Augustine, whose conversion took place over half a lifetime.⁷ Indeed, he was one of the most converted of men. His youthful conversion to the pursuit of wisdom was followed by conversion to Manicheism, then to Neo-Platonism, and finally to Christianity.⁸ Each of them left their imprint on his intellectual and spiritual development.⁹

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⁴ McFague, 255

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*, 259

⁷ Thomas M. Finn, *It Happened One Saturday Night: Ritual and Conversion in Augustine's North Africa*, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, (ATLA Serials 2001), 609

⁸ Markus, 2

⁹ *ibid*, 13

Augustine's conversion is often pinpointed at that moment in the garden when he hears a child's voice saying "take and read, take and read". But it was not primarily at this moment. It began many years before. The process was an intricate and ambiguous one with many moments and setbacks over some thirty-three years, that worked in the secret recesses of Augustine's being to bring him to that moment.

The First Conversion

In his 19th year, Augustine was introduced to Cicero's *Hortensius*. The exhortation to divine Wisdom, as the stable whole in which all finite things were contained, was precisely the thing for which he had been unwittingly searching. He became a Philosopher, a lover of Wisdom.

Augustine, himself, indicated that his reading of *Hortensius* was the first significant turning point in his life, and the one in which he was directed toward God."¹⁰ However he could and did fall away from the good he desired. The chief problem was that while the love of wisdom was the beginning of the return to God it was merely the first moment in that movement. Moreover, The wisdom he desired was present at this point only in an abstract and indefinite form, and he had no idea what it might be in itself.¹¹ Even as he describes how he burned with a desire for God, he did not know what God required of him. "I was on fire then, my God, I was on fire to leave earthly things behind and fly back to you, nor did I know what you would do with me..."¹²

¹⁰ Colin Starnes, Augustine's Conversion: A Guide to the Argument of Confessions I-IX, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1990), 60-61

¹¹ *ibid*, 61

¹² Saint Augustine, 56

One thing checked the ardor *Hortensius* had ignited, there was no mention of Christ. As Augustine stated, "...I could not be entirely swept away by anything, however learned, or well written or true, which made no mention of this name."¹³ He therefore decided to give his attention to the study of the Holy Scriptures, but his examination ended in failure. He found no Wisdom, only a mass of crude stories and myths that were unworthy of comparison with those of Cicero. He wanted a wisdom that would impress the worldly wise. The scriptures contained nothing of the sort.¹⁴

The conversion to philosophy did not last. Its actual result was that Augustine gave up Christianity and became a Manichee.¹⁵

The Second Conversion

St. Augustine's finding the scriptures wanting was not due to *Hortensius* alone. His mind occupied with three considerations: a desire for truth, the love of the name of Christ, as well as dissatisfaction with the scriptures. The Manichees offered him satisfaction on these three points exactly.¹⁶

Within a few days of his reading of *Hortensius*, Augustine was enrolled as an Auditor among the Manichees, who professed to teach truth which could be perceived through reason, and who still retained in reverence the name of Christ

One cannot understand Augustine's conversion without being acquainted with the teaching of the Manichees. The Manichees regarded life as governed by

¹³ St. Augustine, 57

¹⁴ Starnes, 62

¹⁵ John J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine: The Growth of St. Augustine's Mind up to His Conversion*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1954), 58

¹⁶ *ibid*, 61

the conjunction of stars and planets at birth. Since the demons manipulated the planets, one needed to resort to religion and astrology to outwit them.¹⁷ They made a serious and detailed attack on the Old Testament, claiming that its God was irresponsible, immoral and irascible. His favourites were worthless, and the Law handed down by them was ridiculous and unworthy of a God.¹⁸ He made man in his own image, therefore He must have a nose, mouth, beard and entrails. They questioned why he created a sinner and noxious animals. They accused the Old Testament God of showing various unworthy feelings: envy, fear, gluttony and anger. They pointed out his bias – he robbed the Egyptians to enrich the Israelites. Furthermore, his ideals were low. His first command to the first man and woman was increase and multiply. The prophets also come under the lash for carnal acts and other misdemeanours. The ten commandments were also ridiculed.¹⁹

The New Testament was criticized with almost equal violence. The Manichees claimed that Christians fabricated a relationship between the Old and the New Testaments; and that the latter was not to be relied on as source of information about the life and teaching of Jesus. Indeed, it was in conflict with the truth, as enshrined in the pure faith of the Manichees. They also asserted that much of the New Testament was written by later disciples, enamoured with Judaism, who inserted textual material that altered its original meaning. Of serious concern was the fact that the four gospels all have different plot lines;

¹⁷ O' Meara, 64

¹⁸ *ibid*, 65

¹⁹ *ibid* 65-66

and that Matthew and Luke give different versions of Jesus' generation that cannot be reconciled.²⁰

Augustine was deeply impressed by the difficulties raised by the Manichees. He was even more impressed by the Manichees' special and profound abhorrence for the Christian belief in Christ's birth of a virgin and his death on the Cross.²¹

In general terms, the Manichean doctrine arises from their radical solution to the problem of evil. They posited two independent principles: the Good, which was all light; and the Evil, which was all darkness. The two existed independently and apart through eternity. In the good is harmony, in the evil chaos and confusion. The Father of Light is finite and limited (by the independent Principle of Evil). The Prince of Darkness is a cruel and unjust tyrant who does nothing but evil.²²

The test of Augustine's belief in Manicheism is that he remained a member for ten years. Its teachings made his ultimate conversion more difficult and deeply affected his mind. He could not have found his wisdom among a more extreme group of men. The Manichees were a small sect with a sinister reputation. They were illegal and later savagely persecuted. They had the aura of a secret society. Indeed, they have been described as the Bolsheviks of the fourth century, a 'fifth column' of foreign origin bent on infiltrating the Christian church.²³

²⁰ O'Meara, 67-68

²¹ *ibid*, 69

²² *ibid*, 69-70

²³ Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo: A Biography, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).
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Indeed, the charges of monstrous practices levied against the Manichees resulted in the following proscriptions: Diocletian in 296 decreed their leaders were to be burned along with their books, and their followers to be decapitated or condemned to the mines and their property was to be confiscated by the state. In 372 Valentinian prohibited them from meeting under pain of fine or banishment and confiscation of property. in 381, Theodosius took their civil rights away, and in 382, he ordered the ultimate punishment for those who tried to live in community (this doubtless caused Faustus, the Manichaen Bishop, to flee to Africa).²⁴

When Faustus, met with Augustine at Carthage in 383 CE, he couldn't answer Augustine's questions satisfactorily. Augustine described him as a great snare of the Devil and indicated that many were caught in his snare, charmed by the smoothness of his language. Augustine had been told he was a remarkable scholar in all branches of learning, particularly the liberal sciences; but he discovered otherwise. "I put forward some of the things which were disturbing me and at once discovered this man was not educated in any of the liberal sciences except literature, and even here his learning was of a very conventional kind. He had read some of Cicero's speeches, a few books by Seneca, some poetry, and those volumes written by people of his own persuasion which were in Latin and were neatly constructed..."²⁵ When Augustine put the question of whether after comparing the Manichee fables about the heavens and stars and the sun and the moon with the calculations he had read elsewhere (astrology)

²⁴ O'Meara, 102

²⁵ Saint Augustine, 97-98

the facts were as stated in the book of Manes, or if any equally good explanation could be discovered, Faustus declined to answer. He was ignorant of these matters and was not ashamed to admit it.²⁶

From that time Manicheism no longer had his complete loyalty, although he continued to call himself one.

The Third Conversion

Dissatisfied with conditions in Carthage, Augustine decided to go to Rome to teach. Although still in the fellowship of the Elect he saw no way of going farther in that false doctrine, and began to lose interest in even the principals with which he agreed.

On coming to Rome Augustine allowed himself to be regarded as a Manichee, and the Manichees there helped him to open a school of rhetoric. However, teaching at Rome was not as he imagined. Students would cheat a Professor, by going en masse to another professor to avoid paying fees. Therefore, When the Symmachus, City Prefect of Rome, received a message from Milan asking him to provide a professor of Rhetoric and promising to pay the travel expense, Augustine applied.

Symmachus arranged for Augustine's appointment at Milan. Augustine likely owed the appointment to the fact he was not a Christian. Symmachus was the greatest and most influential of the pagans at the time, and an opponent of

²⁶ ibid

the Christian Ambrose. So Augustine went to Milan under the highest pagan patronage.²⁷

Augustine frequently refers to Ambrose as one of the chief human instruments in his conversion, while at the same time conveying he had no intimate acquaintance with him. Ambrose provided Augustine with the synthesis of Neo-Platonism and Christianity, which on the intellectual side brought him to the faith. But the work was done through Ambrose's sermons, which commended themselves entirely to his intelligence. One could be a Christian he now knew without ceasing to use one's reason.²⁸

Augustine gradually came to see Ambrose was speaking the truth, and that the points he made could be defended. He had thought that the Catholic Faith could not be defended against the objections of the Manichees, but he then saw how it could be maintained on reasonable grounds – especially when he heard passages in the Old Testament explained in a figurative way. The literal reading he had previously taken was what had defeated him.²⁹ Augustine became more and more convinced, listening to Ambrose preach, that “knots of cunning calumny” deceivers had tied in attacks on the Holy Scriptures could be unraveled. In particular, he discovered that the phrase “man created by Thee, after Thine own image”, was not understood in such a way as to mean that God is bounded by the shape of a human body.³⁰ “But you, the highest and the nearest, most hidden and most present, have no limbs or parts greater and

²⁷ O'Meara, 115

²⁸ *ibid* 116-118

²⁹ St. Augustine, 109

³⁰ St. Augustine, 115

smaller; you are everywhere in your entirety, yet limited by no particular space; you are not of any bodily form, yet you made man "after your own image" and, see, man is in space from head to foot."³¹

Ambrose would draw aside the veil of mystery and explain in a spiritual sense the meaning of things, which if taken literally, appeared to be teaching what was wrong. Augustine said, "I was happy when I heard Ambrose in his sermons recommend to his congregations a rule to go by 'The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life'."³²

Augustine came to the conclusion that many of the philosophers held views more probable than those of the Manichees. Therefore, in the manner of the Academics – doubting everything and wavering between one thing and another - he decided that he must leave them; and decided to become a catechumen in the Catholic Church until he saw some certain light by which to steer his course.³³

In time, Augustine became a Christian Neo-Platonist like Ambrose was. Ambrose subsequently introduced him to Mallius Theodorus, a noted lay Christian Neo-Platonist author, who introduced him to the Neo-Platonist books he read. He also consulted the old priest Simplicianus, former instructor of, and later successor to Ambrose, another Christian Neo-Platonist on the Christian Neo-Platonist synthesis.³⁴

³¹ St. Augustine

³² *ibid*, 116

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ *ibid*, 119

Conversion to Christianity

The interval between Augustine's conversion to Neo-Platonism and his conversion to Christianity cannot have been great. His final surrender to Christianity came in August 386.

His intellectual submission to Christianity was occasioned by his reading of the writings of St. Paul, which he was reading to discover any accord between his teaching and that of the Neo-Platonists. Neo-Platonism finally delivered him from the two persisting difficulties so deeply ingrained in him by the Manichean teaching of a material God and a principle of Evil. The Neo-Platonist teaching bridged the gap between a material Manicheism and a spiritual Christianity. The immaterialism of the former helped him to dismiss the materialism of the latter, and he rejected both together for their pride and superstition.³⁵

At this point Augustine was convinced of the truth of Christianity, however he could not yet bring himself to practice it or to follow the chastity it demanded. "The intellect was satisfied, but the will was inert".³⁶ Therefore, he consulted Simplicianus about his problem. That interview forced him to realize it was essential to profess the Christian faith.³⁷

Simplicianus also told him the story of Victorianus' conversion and Augustine became on fire to imitate him. The example of Victorianus narrowed down the issue to one point, Augustine's will on continence.³⁸

³⁵ O'Meara, 158-159

³⁶ *ibid*, 169

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ *ibid*, 172

There quickly came another challenge to his will, and from that he emerged converted. It was occasioned by a visit of a fellow African, Pontitianus, who related the story of the Christian Egyptian monk, Antony. Augustine realized that It was either himself alone incontinent, or himself with Christ, continent.³⁹

The ultimate challenge had come. "Was he going to follow the Neo-Platonists in their pride, who presumed to rely on reason alone and themselves to practice virtue and arrive at union with the One? Victorinus had not done so. Antony, the desert monks and the couples of Trier had practiced continence-but only because they had accepted Christ, who had sustained them in their life of asceticism? Would he not also follow their example? He wanted above all to do so – there was really no choice-he only lacked that final act of will and it, he knew was possible:"

While Ponticianus was speaking, Augustine relates that the Lord was turning him around so he could see himself; a foul sight: crooked, filthy, spotted, and ulcerous. "I saw and was horrified, and I had nowhere to go to escape from myself ...you were setting me in front of myself, forcing me to look into my own face, so that I might see my sin and hate it."⁴⁰

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I had thought the reason why I was putting off from day to day the time when I should despise all worldly hopes and follow you alone was because I could see no certainty toward which I could direct my course. But now the day had come when in my own eyes I was stripped naked and my conscience cried

³⁹ O'Meara, 178

⁴⁰ St. Augustine, 173

out against me ... I was being gnawed at inside .. lost and overwhelmed in a terrible kind of shame.”⁴¹

After Ponticianus left, St. Augustine lashed his soul with every scourge of condemnation to follow him now that he was trying to follow God. He withdrew to a garden attached to his lodging, flung himself down on the ground under a fig tree, and gave free rein to his tears. “Suddenly a voice reached his ears from a nearby house ... and in a kind of singsong the words were constantly repeated: “Take it and read it. Take it and read it.”. ⁴²

Augustine checked the force of his tears, rose to his feet, and snatched up the book of the Apostle Paul. He opened it, and read in silence the passage upon which his eyes first fell:

*“Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and in envying, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in concupiscence.”*⁴³

When hereached the end of this sentence it was as though his heart was filled with a light of confidence and all the shadows of doubt were swept away.⁴⁴

“The conversion of Augustine, of his intellect which could not resist the truth, and of his will which could resist the good, was accomplished.”⁴⁵

Conclusion

The garden scene notwithstanding, It is impossible to pinpoint Augustine's conversion at any particular moment. His conversion was not merely an

⁴¹ St. Augustine, 174

⁴² ibid, 182

⁴³ ibid, 183

⁴⁴ ibid

⁴⁵ O'Meara, 179

intellectual assent or an emotional experience. Rather, it was a radical reorientation of a total way of being in the world. It took years to complete the reconciliation of both the earthly and the spiritual life. The journey culminated in his insight into the meaning of the incarnation,⁴⁶

As McFague observed, in Platonism Augustine almost found everything, except he did not find that the Word became flesh. This was the insight he needed. The fleshly life (which he loved), and the and spiritual life (which he also loved) were not enemies, as the Manichees had claimed and to which the Platonists acquiesced. Rather, because God became manifest in human life, flesh and spirit are both necessary and good.⁴⁷ This insight in to the meaning of the incarnation provided the perspective from which he wrote the Confessions.

In so doing, he demonstrated, in detail, how his life had been radically dependent on God's love and direction from the very beginning. What seemed like petty and insignificant details – a baby greedy for its mother's milk, boys stealing pears, the death of a friend are not insignificant at all. They are occasions for concretely tracing his way to God.⁴⁸

In McFague's words, "Augustine did not have to cast aside his own life to find God; in fact the opposite was the case - he had to find God in that life."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ McFague, 261

⁴⁷ ibid

⁴⁸ ibid

⁴⁹ ibid

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