



STATEMENT DC-173

VIEWPOINT

AUGUSTINE: Monistic Mystic or Historic Christian?

by Gordon R. Lewis

St. Augustine (AD 354-430), who lived mostly in North Africa in what is now Algeria, was the most influential theologian of both the ancient patristic and later medieval church (two periods in church history that met during his lifetime). More than a millennium later, he was a major resource for the Protestant Reformers, and today he continues to influence people from many different denominations and cultural backgrounds.

Yet, in recent years, questions have arisen concerning the nature of Augustine's Christianity. As medieval scholar Etienne Gilson has noted, "A great deal of discussion has raged over the testimony of the *Confessions* [Augustine's autobiography], some considering that Augustine was converted to Neoplatonism rather than to Christianity, others that his conversion was genuinely Christian."¹

What are we to make of this? Was this great spiritual leader truly converted to Christ, or was he converted to what might be labeled in academic jargon a Neoplatonic monistic mysticism? By this is meant an outlook based on the Greek philosopher Plato as interpreted by Plotinus, who taught in Rome (AD 245-270). Plotinus's Neoplatonism considered God and creation simply as one great unity (monism), not known through the revelation of Scripture, but through personal introspection and an experience of mystical union with the One (mysticism). The implications are profound, especially when we consider the growing influence of the non-Christian alternative. The increasingly popular Eastern mysticism of Hinduism and Buddhism runs along those lines, as does the widely influential New Age movement, which, in Shirley MacLaine's words, would have everyone believe, "You are God."

Illustrating the relevance of this issue, a student in my course on Augustine had considered herself a Christian although she was in fact a pantheist, believing that God was incarnate in everyone, not just in Jesus. During a lecture based on an early draft of this article, she came to realize that she had not been a Christian at all, but was, indeed, a monistic mystic. In her seminar report to the class, she marked that lecture as the occasion of her conversion to the incarnate Christ as her Savior!

To pursue these concerns, we need to go back to Augustine's youth, when for several years he had been involved in Manicheism. This was an ancient religion from Persia that accounted for all the world's disharmony in terms of an eternal struggle between physical light and darkness. After several years as an adherent of the Manichean religion, Augustine read the writings of Neoplatonists such as Plotinus. That philosophy helped him move beyond the

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

materialism of Manicheism. Then, at the age of 32, Augustine embraced Jesus Christ, whom he professed to serve the rest of his life as a pastor and writer.²

For answers to the role of Neoplatonic and Christian ideas in Augustine's mature views, we turn to the *Confessions*, the classic account of his conversion, written when he was 43-47 years old. Here lies the key to Augustine's concept of (1) God, (2) evil, (3) the *Logos*, or divine Word, and (4) spirituality. A comparison of Augustine's beliefs with Neoplatonic mysticism will help in evaluating the assertions of many historians and biblical scholars who regard him a Neoplatonic mystic. A closer look at Augustine's faith will also help those who — like my above mentioned student — seek to clarify the object of their own faith.

GOD

According to Augustine's own account, from his youth onward he was driven by a quest for true wisdom. When the young Augustine read Cicero's *Hortensius*, it "stimulated, and enkindled, and inflamed to love, seek, obtain, hold, and embrace, not this or that sect, but wisdom itself . . ." ³ "Hungering for wisdom (Latin *sapientia*, changeless truth), he turned to the Manichees and "they instead of Thee, [O God,] served up the sun and the moon, beautiful works of Thine, but yet Thy works, not Thyself."⁴ Fed on the husks of materialistic fantasies Augustine could not understand how ultimate reality (God) could be spirit. "Nearly nine years passed in which I wallowed in the slime of that deep pit and the darkness of falsehood, striving often to rise, but being all the more heavily dashed down."⁵

After hearing Ambrose, the great bishop of Milan, preach, Augustine came to realize that the Christian faith did not hold, as Manicheans had supposed, that God was bounded by human form. He blushed that for so many years he had "barked" at a straw man. But, "what was the nature of a spiritual substance I had not the faintest or dimmest suspicion."⁶ Although he now did not think of God in a human body, he "could not avoid a concept of something corporeal in space, either infused into the world, or infinitely diffused beyond it."⁷ However, he was given certain books of the Platonists, and through them was able to ascend "from bodies to the soul . . . on to the reasoning faculty . . . And thus, with the flash of a trembling glance . . . saw Thy invisible things."⁸ In the judgment of Whitney J. Oates, "The Platonic tradition [of the new Academy of Plotinus] unquestionably prepared the way for him to accept and realize the meaning of Christianity's doctrine of God as Spirit."⁹

From Plotinus, however, Augustine learned to think of God as "a transcendent absolute principle" about which no positive attribute derived from human experience can be asserted.¹⁰ "The Absolute is none of the things of which it is the source. Its nature is that nothing can be affirmed of it — not existence, not essence, not life — since it is that which transcends all these . . . Once you have uttered 'Good,' add no further thought to it: by any addition . . . you introduce a deficiency."¹¹

But later as a Christian, Augustine "does not follow Plotinus in ascribing to God such complete transcendence as would remove him from contact with human experience and render theology impotent to assign his attributes."¹² Once converted, Augustine turned to the personal, living, and active divine Spirit, a major step beyond Neoplatonism. He discovered that the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture is not indescribable. Augustine learned to preach and write of God's attributes, such as His holy love. He knew that God loved him and forgave his sins. Augustine's frequent prayers express his deep affection for the One who was not only transcendent, but knowable, describable, and active in his transformed life. "Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee."¹³

EVIL

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

In the stormy period before Augustine's conversion, the problem of evil greatly perplexed him. The adolescent became aware of his unjustifiable maliciousness. He stole pears, for example, not because he was hungry or to give to the starving, but just to be sinful. As a Manichean materialist, he blamed his sexual immoralities on a "sort of substance possessed of its own foul and misshapen mass."¹⁴ Influenced by Neoplatonists, he came to think that everything emanated from God, like light rays from the sun. Evil, then, became "no substance at all but simply a defection in substance. Evil had no being whatever apart from good, for all things are good in so far as they exist."¹⁵ Consequently, he dismissed his sins as unreal appearances, much like Christian Scientists do today.

But when he became a Christian his world view began with creation rather than with emanation. "I perceived, therefore, and it was made clear to me, that Thou didst make all things good, nor is there any substance at all that was not made by Thee."¹⁶ Analyzing his own moral conflicts, he realized that evil was far more than privation of good. It was "a perversion of the will, bent aside from Thee, O God."¹⁷ "Because of a perverse will was lust made; and lust indulged in became custom; and custom not resisted became necessity."¹⁸ So his habitual selfish choices strengthened an already evil nature. Holding now that evil was not mere privation of good but a responsible choice to disobey the Creator, he had taken a second major step beyond Neoplatonism.¹⁹

Given such a radically different view of evil, we would expect a convert to Christ to sense a radically different prescription for its cure. Neoplatonists thought they emanated from God like light rays from the sun, and they imagined they could reverse that impersonal process by thinking. They tried to alter their consciousness of themselves from that of a finite body to an individual soul. Next they had to convince themselves they were one with the world soul (something like psychologist Carl Jung's collective unconscious). Finally, the spiritually elite imagined that they could achieve a mystical experience of unity with the Good.²⁰

Augustine discovered experientially and biblically that his problem was more than one of knowledge (Greek *gnosis*) or wrong thinking. His affections and will also reacted against what God knew, loved, and willed. He realized that he could not by his own thinking transform the depravity of his own nature, overcome his estrangement from God, or remove his verdict of guilt before God's justice. Coming to his senses, the prodigal son realized his need for help from above.

THE LOGOS

In contrast to the meaninglessness of a Manichean world view, Neoplatonic philosophy supplied an important step in Augustine's understanding of life's ultimate significance. In the Platonic writings he read — not in the same words, but to the same effect — that the *logos* (Greek for "Word") was eternal with God, the unchanging source of all being, the light that lightens every one coming into the world. He found Plato's world of ideas in the Christian *Logos* (John 1:1-3) with one glaring exception — the Platonic *logos* did not become incarnate (1:14)!²¹ Although the Platonic mystics had discovered the forms (changeless patterns or blueprints) of particular kinds of things, they had detected neither God's hand in history nor His gracious plan of salvation.

Nowhere did Augustine read in those books that the eternal *logos* became flesh (John 1:14) so that sinners might become children of God (1:12). Only from biblically informed Christians did he learn that Jesus humbled Himself to death for the ungodly, forgiving all their sins, and saying, "Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29). By missing the historical incarnation of the Messiah and His death for our sins, Plotinus had ignored the ground of hope for people struggling personally with the problem of moral evil.

Moreover, Plotinus so despised matter that he would not even mention his conception, birthday, or parents! For such unearthly mystics the historical life of Christ may have seemed unimportant or repugnant. But the believing Augustine took a giant step beyond their mysticism when he gloried in the miraculous, once-for-all historical

conception and birth of Jesus the Messiah.²² Had Augustine been converted to Neoplatonism rather than to Christ, he would never have written his autobiographical *Confessions* and philosophy of history, *The City of God*.

An individual life for a Neoplatonist was of negligible value and had no lasting purpose. For the Christian Augustine, the struggle of one solitary person with intellectual and moral issues has significance for time and eternity.

SPIRITUALITY

Having dispensed with corporeal views of God and evil and having glimpsed the invisible Creator and Redeemer in a spiritual manner, Augustine confesses, "I sought a way of acquiring sufficient strength to enjoy Thee; but I found it not until I embraced that Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus."²³ Assured that God existed as the infinite, immutable source of all things, he was too weak to enjoy Him.²⁴ Although a successful professor of rhetoric, his life amounted to "longing for honors, gains and wedlock." At 30 he suffered increasing anxiety, a silent trembling, a loathing of self, an internal war. Inwardly consumed and confounded, he wrote, "I became to myself an unfruitful land"²⁵ — a figure significant for T. S. Eliot in his poem "The Wasteland."

When Augustine cried, "What shall a wretched man do?" he found no solace in mystical philosophy. "This those writings contain not. Those pages contain not the expression of this piety — the tears of confession, Thy sacrifice, a troubled spirit, a broken and contrite heart, the salvation of the people, the espoused city, the earnest of the Holy Ghost, the cup of our redemption. No man sings there."²⁶

Gilson eloquently points up Neoplatonic spirituality's impotence:

That Plotinus should advise us to rise above sense, to rule our passions, and to adhere to God, that is all well and good! But will Plotinus give us the strength to follow this excellent advice? And what does it avail to know the good without power to put it into practice? What kind of physician is this who recommends health, and knows neither the nature of the illness nor the name of the remedy? What really completed the conversion of St. Augustine was the perusal of St. Paul and the revelation of grace: 'For the law of the spirit of life in Jesus Christ freed me,' he argues, 'from the law of sin and death.' It was not an intellect that agonized in the night in the garden of Gethsemane: it was a man.²⁷

In conclusion, Neoplatonism helped the perceptive Augustine move away from a secular world view in four ways. But in becoming a Christian he went well beyond the four areas of monistic mysticism that we have reviewed. His teaching is unmistakably Christian concerning (1) the ultimate Reality's personal nature, (2) sin as perversion of the will, (3) the once-for-all incarnation and atonement, and (4) the need for grace-filled, authentic spirituality beginning with regeneration from above, a supernatural transformation of nature from the inside out.

New Age, Eastern, and liberal Christian monistic mysticisms have helped many to move beyond a simply physical or secular world view. But they are not a permanent answer to the human quest for the Transcendent. Augustine noted that seekers of great acuteness and ability in the school of Plotinus either "were corrupted by curious inquiries into magic" or "passed into the service of Christ."²⁸

If, like Augustine, we would avoid such deceptions, we need to know, love, and follow the eternal *Logos* incarnate on earth — Jesus of Nazareth, whom we know from the pages of the Bible. As the Evangelist John puts it in his second letter, "Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. . . . Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son" (2 John 7-9).

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

Gordon R. Lewis is senior professor of Theology and Philosophy at Denver Seminary.

NOTES

¹Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1950), 29.

²For a more chronological, popular account of Augustine's conversion, consult my "See Yourself in Augustine," *Collegiate Challenge*, May-June 1962, 8-9. Also read Augustine's classic *Confessions* for yourself!

³Augustine, *Confessions* book 3, section 4, in *The Basic Writings of St. Augustine*, Whitney J. Oates, ed., 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1948), 32. All other citations from the *Confessions* are from this source.

⁴*Ibid.*, 3, 6, 33.

⁵*Ibid.*, 3, 11, 40.

⁶*Ibid.*, 6, 3, 76.

⁷*Ibid.*, 7, 1, 91.

⁸*Ibid.*, 7, 17, 105.

⁹*Ibid.*, from Oates's Introduction, xvi-xvii.

¹⁰Edwin A. Burt, *Types of Religious Philosophy* (New York: Harper, 1939), 66.

¹¹Plotinus, *Ennead* III, 8-10; cited by W. J. Sparrow Simpson, *St. Augustine's Conversion* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 51.

¹²Burt, *Types*, 78.

¹³Augustine, 1,1, 7.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 5, 10, 69.

¹⁵Roy W. Battenhouse, ed., *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine* (New York: Oxford, 1955), 30.

¹⁶Augustine, 7, 12, 102.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 7, 16, 104.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 7, 5, 116.

¹⁹For a contemporary look at Augustinian doctrines of sin and salvation, see Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 2:205-43.

²⁰Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome*, vol. 1 (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1953), 464-75. Note the similarities to Anthony Campbell's *Seven States of Consciousness: A Vision of Possibilities Suggested by the Teaching of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 91-92.

²¹Augustine, 7, 9, 99.

²²For more on Augustine's classical view of faith and reason, see G. R. Lewis, "Faith and History in Augustine," *Trinity Theological Journal* 1,3 (NS 1982), 39-50 and "Faith and Reason in the Thought of St. Augustine," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, 1959.

²³*Ibid.*, 7, 18, 105.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 7, 20, 107.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 8, 5-7; 116-20. For clarification of his relation to existentialism see G. R. Lewis, "Augustine and Existentialism," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 8,1 (Winter 1965): 13-22.

²⁶Augustine, 7, 21, 108.

²⁷Gilson, 30.

²⁸Augustine, "Letter CXVIII [118]," 3, 17 in *St. Augustine*, vol. 1, Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 450.

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299