



Journal of Religion & Society

The Kripke Center

Volume 2 (2000)

Critical Musings on Dixon's Augustine

Augustine and the *Confessions*

A Review of Sandra Lee Dixon, *Augustine: The Scattered and Gathered Self* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999).

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[1] I have been working extensively with Augustine since 1993, focusing especially on his life-long preoccupation with the interpretation of Genesis 1-3. One could argue that, in essence, Augustine wrote *five* commentaries on that text. Shortly after his conversion, he wrote a commentary on Genesis, *Against the Manichees in Two Books*. Then, he attempted a so-called "literal" commentary that remains incomplete. Several books of the *City of God* comprise yet another commentary on Genesis, as Augustine articulated a Christian political philosophy, with parallels to Plato's *Republic*, in response to the fall of Rome in 410 CE. Toward the end of his life, he returned to the notion of rendering a literal commentary on Genesis 1-3. This time he produced a work running 1,100 pages in Latin. And, of course, there is the commentary of *Confessions*, especially Books 12 and 13. For my own work, I hope to document how Augustine's exegesis evolves from work to work and to note how the questions he posed to the text changed and how the results he obtained differ.

[2] Needless to say, as I read Sandra Lee Dixon's *Augustine: The Scattered and Gathered Self*, I was anxious to see how her methodology would shape her reading of the end of *Confessions*. In other words, I could barely wait to get to Chapter 8: "Augustine and *Confessions* 10-13." Given my interests, I will confine my response to issues raised in that chapter, with the hope that they will nevertheless engage the book as a whole.

[3] Dixon begins the chapter with a discussion of the relationship of Books 10-13, which are not explicitly autobiographical, to Books 1-9. Every interpreter of *Confessions* must wrestle with this question. Drawing on the insights of Peter Brown and Robert McMahon, Dixon notes that, while Books 11-13 are less obviously autobiographical, they give the reader a glimpse into the life of the Bishop where the interpretation of scripture and debate with opponents were all-consuming. Dixon concludes: "These two concerns, interpretation of scripture and debate with opponents motivate many of [Augustine's] literary accomplishments during the rest of his episcopacy. In the last books of the *Confessions*, then, Augustine does not so much describe himself at work as allow us to see him living out his role" (178). I found this a very insightful tack to take.

[4] Dixon then argues that a pervasive theme in these final books is the *exercitatio animi*—the "exercise of the soul." Having introduced this interpretive framework, there is one of the most concise, and I would say, finest summaries of the four books that I have ever read.

The idea of the *exercitatio animi* also helps illuminate the relationship of books 10 through 13 to books 1 through 9. In books 10 through 13 Augustine continues the exercises of the soul. The books focus, however, on the present of his life. Book 10 does this most obviously, as Augustine reflects on the inquiries he wants to put to God, the distractions that lead him back to the world of the senses and away from God, and the gifts of God that give him hope for and a taste of a happy life. Book 11 asks about the nature of time and eternity, and thus about the nature of the soul, which appears, as Augustine says, "distended" in time and yearning for eternity (XI.xxix.39). Such an abstract reflection would not speak to the untrained reader. A reader who had traversed the first ten books of the *Confessions*, however, might begin to follow the general point of book 11, even if its more complex philosophical turns would still confound a philosophical neophyte. Book 12 discusses the origin of the whole creation in time, what God's creating it means, what sort of being it has, how it stands in relation to heaven, and so on. Again, this is a much more abstract reflection than those in the earlier books. Augustine has already prepared the reader, however, for the idea of the spiritual interpretation of the scriptures. He helps the reader see in this book how such an interpretation might work, the pitfalls it encounters, and how Augustine can hope to answer the problems that arise. Book 13 then moves the reader through further interpretation of creation into a biblical understanding of society, the role of Christians and the church in it, and how Christians can progress toward the happy life of living rightly with God and other human beings. It suggests an allegorical reading of the Bible that sketches a general scheme of human life in society that mirrors aspects of Augustine's own individual life. For instance, it talks about the importance of examples of Christian lives and the need for people authoritative in the spiritual life to guide people less mature in it so that they can grow into wisdom. The biblical allegory thereby echoes the influence of people like Ambrose and Simplicianus and Monica on Augustine. But his personal experience has been raised again to a more universal and intellectual level.

Yet another important aspect of the relationship of books 10 through 13 to books 1 through 9 is the development of an approach to Augustine's effort to understand God and himself and the inversion of that approach. In books 1 through 9, and somewhat in book 10, Augustine searches through his own experience to find God. In books 11 through 13 especially, he seeks to understand the things that he believes God has taught humanity through creation and the scriptures' story of it. By doing so he can understand himself. In the earlier books he writes from himself toward God and in the later books from a perspective of revelation by God, as he see it, toward himself (180-81).

[5] Another important set of observations in this chapter has to do with Augustine and *intertextuality*, what Dixon describes as "the play of one text in another and the meaning that arises by the interchange, juxtapositions, and contrasts of ideas, allusions, and images between the texts in question" (181). With this definition, I was reminded of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. When William and Adso enter for the first time in the maze-like aedificium, the monastery's library and scriptorium, William says that "books talk to books; they murmur among themselves." As Dixon comes to the end of her discussion, she draws a distinction between the intertextuality to be discerned in Augustine's writings, and our twenty-first century intrigue with intertextuality.

Yet these literary interests, which in our day intrigue people who explore intertextuality, formed part of a network of concepts for Augustine that differ sharply from those of students of literature at the turn of the twenty-first century. Augustine had taken seriously Cicero's recommendation that a person seek the truth in whatever philosophical school might hold it (III.iv.8). In the long run he concluded that such a truth exists, and counseled the readers of *On Christian Doctrine* that "every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord's. This statement contradicts crucial considerations implied in today's term 'intertextuality'" (182).

I find the discussion a bit truncated; I would like to have an elaboration on the explicit contrast she is trying to make.

[6] For this chapter, a key for illuminating Augustine's intertextuality and the structure of *Confessions*, is his reading of Paul's letter to the Romans, especially chapters 7 and 9. There is a statement in this discussion I find confusing. Dixon asserts, "certain crucial ideas seemed to tighten like a vise and hold his thought to new determinations: first, God chooses who will have faith and who will not have it, and second, good works follow from faith and allow a person to attain the reward of eternal life. That is to say" - and here is the phrase that perplexes me - "he no longer proposes God as the *foreknowing* deity who chooses people, like Moses and Jacob, because God knows they will have faith while other people will not. Rather, they receive faith because God chooses them" (182). I think I am tripping over "foreknowing" and "choosing." I think I stumble over her choice of vocabulary because lurking in Romans 8.29-30 are the words: "For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son . . . and those whom He predestined

He also called; those whom He called He also justified; and those whom He justified He also glorified." This section needs elaboration and clarification.

[7] Regarding Romans, Stanley Stowers of Brown University has recently produced a commentary on Paul's epistle entitled, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, & Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). In this book, Augustine's reading of Romans takes some pretty hard knocks. And, yet, in his new perusal of Romans, Stowers maintains that what Paul is *actually* preoccupied with in the letter (as opposed to what Augustine sees in Paul) is moral self-mastery. He writes, "Paul develops a rhetorical strategy to persuade [Gentile Christians] that the acceptance and self-mastery they seek is to be found not in following Jewish teachers who advocate works from the law but in what God has done and is even now doing through Jesus Christ" (36). As I read Dixon's account of Augustine's interpretation of Romans 7 and 9, I am persuaded that she and Professor Stowers could have an interesting dialogue about a rereading of the blessed Augustine.

[8] Before leaving the subject of intertextuality, I want to share with readers another favorite passage in this chapter. Dixon asks: "But how should a person put a mystical insight into words? This a great and unsolvable problem of mystical experience. One might use the words at hand already in cultural works, which might themselves have been shaped by some such experience. And one might also find that the experience floats as another text, a wordless text, perhaps even an imageless text, shaping the flow of the other words, and reinforcing the conviction with which they are offered to their public" (186). I wish I had written that.

[9] Toward to the end of the section on Augustine on Romans 9, I was interested in what Dixon had to say about his concern about God's justice and what he has to say about God's "*hidden equity* that cannot be searched out by any human standard of measurement . . ." That Augustine entertained such a notion was somewhat surprising to me. I tend to associate that worry with John Calvin. In Calvin's sermons on Job, especially Job 4:18, he introduces the idea of God's inscrutability, even God's *double justice* - a revealed and secret justice. The exegetical tradition that informs Calvin's interpretation of Job is usually traced back to Gregory's *Moralia in Iob*. Gregory is certainly the starting point for Susan E. Schreiner's magisterial analysis of Calvin's sermons in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found: Calvin's Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). According to Dixon's reading, however, Augustine adumbrated some of the twists and turns in Calvin's thought.

[10] As Dixon notes, in Book 10 Augustine recalls the distractions of the senses, the sensual pleasures that still tempt him: sleep (though one doubts Augustine ever slept all that much!), smell, hearing, sight, unchecked curiosity, pride, love of praise, self-love, and complacency. Speaking of "curiosity," one of my favorite sayings of Augustine is when he asks, "What was God doing before creating the universe?" His answer is: "Creating hell for the curious." I would want to note that at the end of Chapter 34, where he discusses the temptations of sight and his love of the play of light, he writes: "Though I say this and see that it is true, my feet are still caught in the toils of the world's beauty." Whenever I read that, I am immediately sent back to Book 4.13-15, where he discusses his very first treatise: *On the Beautiful and the Fitting*. Dixon mentions that work only in passing on page 84. About it

Augustine writes, "This idea burst from my heart like water from a spring. My mind was full of it and I wrote a book called *On the Beautiful and Fitting*, in two or three volumes as far as I remember. You remember how many there were, O Lord. I have forgotten, because by some chance the book was lost and I no longer have it." I think it important to recall Augustine's extended mention of this book in 4.13-15, because many of the aesthetic musings, images, and metaphors found there return in the allegory of Book 13.

[11] Unless one is very familiar with *Confessions*, no one can imagine how Augustine obsesses over the "heaven of heavens" which he finds in Psalm 115:16 and which he interprets through the lens of Ecclesiasticus 1:4. Here he strikes Neoplatonic pay dirt. Dixon's discussion is unusually brief, even though she expands upon it in her concluding section, which proffers a very novel line of thinking (which one might want to engage further). This analysis would be nicely supplemented were the reader to pick up A. H. Armstrong's *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940). I did not see it mentioned in the bibliography. With that now-classic resource in hand, I think one can *almost* begin to understand why Augustine is inclined to be so expansive on this topic.

[12] Drawing on a Javanese saying, Dixon conjures an image of a water buffalo listening to a symphony as a metaphor for our oft-frustrated attempts to construe meaning and order - *music* - in our own lives and the lives of those who have gone before us (her book is, after all, a psychobiographical endeavor seeking to render coherent Augustine's life story). The notion is as endearing as it is apt. In her concluding paragraph Dixon fancies, "If I had a water buffalo that seemed to like the symphony - or jazz or rock and roll, for that matter - I would turn on a stereo in its vicinity with its favorite music" (215). I think the water buffalo should have Mahler piped in, perhaps the Second, the so-called "Resurrection" Symphony with its magnificent setting of Klopstock's metaphysical poem, *Urlicht*:

Oh red rose!
Man lies in deepest need.
Man lies in deepest pain.
Yes, I would rather be in heaven!
I came upon a broad path;
An angel came and wanted to send me away.
Ah no! I would not be sent away!
I am from God and will return to God.
Dear God will give me light,
Will illumine me to eternal life!

Mahler's is a symphony whose themes parallel Augustine's own: "The Scattered and Gathered Self." Her music-loving water buffalo would, I suspect, achieve transcendence.