

LESSON 3

AUGUSTINE TO MID-SEVENTH CENTURY (354-650)

Constantine I made a very important difference in the lives of Christians in the Roman world. He made Christianity *the* religion of the New Empire. The Bishops became powerful and respectable leaders. The persecutions seemed to be a thing of the past. Because Christianity now became virtually the official religion of Rome, the Emperor began to try to bring order out of the local power struggles and the inroads of heresy. By the end of the Nicene Council (A.D. 325) it seemed that Christianity was a safe and powerful part of Roman world domination.

But no such thing was true. When Julian (331-363) became the Emperor of Rome, he repudiated the Christian faith, announced himself to be a pagan, and made the Christians pay for rebuilding the pagan temples they had destroyed. However, even Julian promulgated an edict of toleration, and the imperial world-wide persecutions were never to return(?).

Jerome (340-420)

Jerome was commissioned by the Roman Pope Damasus to retranslate the Bible into Latin. His work became the basis of the Vulgate which was used to communicate the meaning and life-style of Christianity to the people of Rome. Although Jerome was contemporary with Augustine of Hippo, Augustine is considered by many to have been the last of the great writers of the Patristic Period (A.D. 100-400).

Because of the influence of Gnosticism and the Neo-Platonic thought of Plotinus, it was the widespread belief of the fourth and fifth-century thinkers that matter was evil. Monasticism and the ascetic life were very popular. Arianism was condemned at Nicea (325), but other "heresies" continued to appear.

The Bishop of Hippo (A.D. 354-430)

Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, was not a Christian for many years. This was not because his saintly mother Monica was not concerned for him. She prayed for him every day and followed him wherever he went throughout the Empire as a popular philosopher and lecturer. But Augustine, whose father persisted as a pagan, was almost profligate according to his own account of his life of sin. He gives his reader to understand that he sought peace and meaning for his life through his study of philosophy and his eloquent teaching of rhetoric.

In his *Confessions* (vii. 9.21; viii. 12) he gives an account of a "personal encounter with Christ" which is almost identical with the "born again" experience of this

UNDERLINE the correct answer.

Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire by Julian, Constantine.

(Constantine)

Julian remained a _____ but issued an edict of _____ for Christians.

(pagan, toleration)

The Bible was translated into Latin by _____.

(Jerome)

Matter was considered evil in the thinking of fourth and fifth-century thinkers due to the influences of _____ and _____.

(Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism)

Augustine was the _____ of _____.

(Bishop, Hippo)

writer and that of many modern believers. This new birth not only changed his life of sin, but it served to revolutionize his thinking and illuminate his philosophical knowledge. He had tried Manichaeism and Scepticism before his conversion only to turn away from these systems deeming them empty and far from meaningful reality—certainly no solution for the inner longing that sent him stumbling through his long quest for reality. Plotinus and his followers appealed to his taste for mysticism, but they, too, were rejected before he encountered the “Lord Jesus Christ.” The conversion he described happened in Milan “precipitated by . . . St. Paul” in Romans 13:13, 14.¹ He gradually came to see the difference in the vision of God and “his relation to man” preferring the Christian revelation to the Neo-Platonic teaching and mystic practices. “To Plotinus,” says Gilson, “he is indebted for almost all the matter and for the whole technique of his philosophy. He is indebted to the Bible for the basic Christian notions which compelled him to make the inner transformations”² to construct a new doctrine. This is probably an exaggeration of the importance of Plotinus. However, the Neo-Platonists did influence the thought forms of Saint Augustine. Augustine granted existence to the ideas of Plato but insisted that those ideas existed in the mind of God. Furthermore, he insisted that if man is ever to understand reality, faith in God must precede his understanding. His thought is founded on three fundamental concepts: (1) faith preceding understanding, (2) the real existence of God, and (3) the nature of man about whom he said, “Thou has formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”³

Augustine affirms that “To the degree that our ideas are eternal they are but the tracing of divine thought. Reality exists only through its conformity to the ideas of God.”⁴ This idea of reality persists in all philosophy that has fallen under the influence of Christ.

Pivotal in the thought of Augustine is the Problem of Evil. If God is supremely good, and certainly omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, then how can evil exist? Having followed Mani, Augustine was obliged to tackle the evil that was so evidently present in the Roman world. Augustine affirmed that God was the only Creator and Sustainer of all things that had being. “Evil was a deprivation of good.”⁵ As for man, evil was produced when man misused his God-given freedom.

The opposing Pelagians, who thought that man could do enough good to put himself right with God, were told that “God alone could put a man right with himself and free him from the consequences of his own sins.”⁶ Augustine

The new birth _____ Augustine's life
of _____.

(changed, sin)

The thought forms of Saint Augustine were influenced by the _____.

(Neo-Platonists)

List three fundamental concepts to the thought of Augustine.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

In the thinking of Augustine, the Problem of Evil was _____.

(pivotal)

The *City of God* was written by _____.

(Augustine)

¹George G. Thomas, *Religious Philosophies of the West* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 71.

²Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1960), p. 234.

³*Confessions*, Book I, Chapter I.

⁴Ch. Perelman, *An Historical Introduction to Philosophical Thinking* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1965), p. 103.

⁵Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 15.

⁶*Ibid.*

wrote the first Christian philosophy of history, *The City of God*.⁷

Although there can be no doubt that Augustine gave a profound theological and philosophical basis to the Roman Catholic doctrines of the Sacraments and the Church, the Reformers drew heavily upon his teachings about the sovereignty of God, man's depraved condition of sin and the indispensable grace of God to save man. His influence over western Christianity in *all* its aspects is beyond measure.

To summarize Augustinian thought: his method is an "inward empiricism which . . . starts from things without, proceeds within to the self, and moves upwards to God."⁸ This dialectic is modified and "polarized" by his insistence on "moderate illuminism." Every being is illuminated ontologically by *number, form, unity and its derivatives, and order*.

From Augustine's time, the fifth century, until the Crusades, there would be some great minds at work in forming Christian thought, but no one person among them would reach the scope of Augustine's influence on western Christianity and the Philosophy of the Christian religion.⁹

Theological Issues

To give a simple history of the Ecumenical Councils from Nicea (325) to Constantinople (553) would be an exercise in theology which does not belong to this study. However, an examination of some of the presuppositions behind this very important activity of Christians in those times can be quite revealing about the influence of their contemporary philosophy upon their theological pursuits.

Augustine, as the orthodox Bishop of Hippo and First Apologist of Christendom, received the dictums of Nicea and Constantinople (381) ready made.

Arianism

Arianism, which was condemned (but not settled) at Nicea, was a struggle to understand the tension between the insistence upon the monotheistic position of all Christians and the worship of Jesus as a Deity. The basic contentions had to do with the reality of Jesus' nature "very God" or "like God;" and this, of course, depended on one's philosophical estimate of reality which had seriously occupied the minds of Plato, Aristotle and especially Plotinus. The Arians tended to believe that Jesus was not God, although the moderates among them "held that Jesus was of a similar essence with God although not of the same substance."¹⁰ No one is quite sure what they really meant, least of all this present writer. The confusion and controversy reflected the

Both Roman Catholics and Reformers drew upon the ideas of _____.

(Augustine)

Is the following statement true or false?

A major struggle within early Christianity had to do with the reality of Jesus' nature. _____

(true)

⁷Ibid.

⁸Emmanuel Chapman, "Augustinianism" in Dagobert D. Runes, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (Totowa, N. J.: Littlefield, Adams and Company, 1967), p. 28.

⁹See Erich Przywara, *An Augustine Synthesis* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1958), who is a recent Roman Catholic writer, a German Jesuit.

¹⁰Vergilius Ferin, *Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 19.

intellectual environment of Alexandria where Arius was a presbyter. He was condemned as a heretic.

Apollinarism

Plagued by the same tension, Apollinaris affirmed that Jesus lacked a human soul, a human will, the Logos of God taking full possession of him.¹¹

The Council of Constantinople (381)

During the lifetime of Augustine the findings of the Council of Constantinople became the orthodox position on the Person of Jesus as both human and Divine, but this by no means settled all the main theological issues.

Nestorius

Nestorius, a patriarch of Constantinople, opposed the trend to call Mary "the mother of God" and insisted that she was the mother of Jesus' manhood. But the struggle with Nestorius was clouded by political overtones between the bishops of the East and the West of the Roman Empire. It was hard to discern what was really accomplished when the Nestorians were declared heretics at the Council of Ephesus (431) near the end of Augustine's life. Certainly the concepts of what composes reality were basic as well as the epistemology of those who participated.

Power Game

In the above and following councils such as Chalcedon (451) and Constantinople (both 553 and 680) theology was the apparent issue, and, as always, the philosophical stance of the participants cast an important influence upon the outcome. Nevertheless, the bishops and patriarchs played a "power game" each time they convened a council, and more times than not, Rome was able to arbitrate the differences in a manner which satisfied the opponents and enhanced the power of the Bishop of Rome.

Leo I

In the case of the Eutychian Controversy, Leo I of Rome in his letter to Flavian defends the position of *two complete natures in one person*. Newman says, "It was greatly to the advantage of the Roman See that his formula . . . should have proceeded from a Roman bishop . . . an important victory for the papacy."¹² This definitive formula of Chalcedon (451) has been claimed by some to reveal Leo as the first real Pope. But his feats in the saving of Rome from Attila the Hun (452) and Genseric the Vandal (455) were a proof of his political persuasive power as well.

He proclaimed himself to be the Lord of the Whole

¹¹Ibid., p. 15.

¹²Albert Henry Newman, *A Manual of Church History*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1906), pp. 345, 46.

Nestorius objected to calling Mary the "_____ of _____."

(mother, God)

In 431 the Nestorians were declared _____.

(heretics)

The bishops and patriarchs played a "_____."

(power game)

Two complete natures in one person was the position on the Person of Christ taken by _____.

(Leo)

Church, but the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451) gave the Patriarch of Constantinople equal prerogatives with the Bishop of Rome.¹³

Gregory I (590-604)

Gregory I was a "prefect" of Rome, but he became deeply interested in the religious life. He resigned his political office and established a number of monasteries and became a monk. He was sent to Constantinople as a diplomat. When he returned to Rome, he wanted to go to England as a missionary, but was elected as Bishop (Pope). He strengthened the Roman See. He sent missionaries to England which resulted in the conversion of many Anglo-Saxons in his times. He gained complete control over all the churches of Italy, Spain, Gaul and England. He enforced general reform and the purification of the Church.

During that time the Patriarch of Constantinople called himself the "Universal Bishop." Gregory rejected that title, but he practically became a "universal bishop" in reality. He wrote *Moralia*, a book on ethics. He revised the liturgy of the Mass and is credited with the revision of church music. He pronounced the doctrines of angelology, the Eucharist, Purgatory and the relics in clear terms. His personal life was exemplary, one of the purest Popes.

Boethius (480-524)

Boethius was a philosopher-statesman. But during the most powerful period of his political life, he was accused of treason against the Emperor Theodoric under whom he was a consul. He was arrested, held prisoner for a long time, and finally executed. While he was in prison he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* dealing with God, Fortune, Evil, and Freedom. He described "how the soul is able to rise above adversity and attain a vision of God through philosophic contemplation."¹⁴ He also translated Aristotle's *Logic*. These works "helped to shape the philosophical vocabulary and questions of the later Middle Ages."¹⁵

¹³Henry H. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1965), p. 770.

¹⁴Colin Brown, p. 17.

¹⁵Ibid.

Gregory I was elected _____ of Rome.

(Bishop)

Give the accomplishments of Gregory I.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Is the following statement true or false?

The writings of Boethius helped to shape the philosophical vocabulary and questions of the later Middle Ages. _____

(true)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (Levels 1, 2, and 3). Read the study guide and answer the following questions:

1. What was Jerome's major contribution?

2. Who was the Bishop of Hippo?

3. What caused Augustine to change his life style?

4. Give three concepts fundamental to the thought of Augustine.

5. What problem was pivotal to the thought of Augustine?

6. What was the title of the first Christian philosophy of history?

7. Name two theological issues over which early Christians struggled.

8. What position did Leo I take on the person of Christ?

9. What prevented Gregory I from becoming a missionary to England?

10. List accomplishments of Gregory I.

11. What contribution did Boethius make to philosophy?

Supplementary activity (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read pages 13-15, 19 and 33 of Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* and answer the following:

1. Discuss the source and nature of Gnosticism according to Brown.
2. Name the author of Manichaeism and describe some of its teachings.
3. How did Manichaeism differ from the Bible with regard to the body of natural man?

Advanced activity (*Level 3*).

1. How did Aristotle's *universals* influence the thinking of the Conceptualists?
2. What does Brown say about the syncretism of medieval thought? Explain.

Seminar Discussion

1. Try to explain Augustine's influence upon Protestants as well as on Roman Catholics.
2. What is the relation between philosophy of religion and *Natural Theology? Revealed Theology?*
3. What influence did Plotinus have upon Augustine? Platonic Realism?