

# St. Augustine

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# Life and Legacy

- Augustine lived from 354 C.E. to 430 C.E. He was Algerian by birth, Numidian by race.
- Roman empire and its fall are the context of Augustine's thought.
  - Christianity was viewed by many Roman intellectuals as the cause of Rome's fall.

# Major Works

- *Enarrationes in Psalmos (Explanations of the Psalms)*  
[written 392-422]
- *De doctrina Christiana (On Christian Doctrine or Teaching)* [written 396]
- *The Confessions* [written 397-401]
- *De civitate Dei (The City of God )* [written 413-427]
- *De trinitate (On the Trinity)* [written 399-422 ]
- *De Genesi ad litteram (Literal Interpretation of Genesis)* [written 401-415 ]

# Uses of the past

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- Augustine codifies the use of the classical past *as a means* for understanding the world in a Christian sense (see p. 70).
- Trained interpreters can dig past the pagan trappings to find underlying truth, but it must be done with care and caution.

# Classical underpinnings

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- Stoic teachings that were important to the church included:
  - The law of nature based on right reason (A Christian understanding of the law of nature)
  - A lost Golden Age (Fall from the Garden of Eden)
  - A universal common humanity (Spiritual dignity of all human beings created in the image of God)

# Manichean underpinnings

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- Augustine's spiritual journey included time spent as a Manichaeon in Italy.
- Manichaean beliefs included:
  - The universe is divided into two material forces, light (goodness) and darkness (evil).
  - The goal of life was to separate these forces.
  - Liberation could be achieved by the elite few who possessed a secret knowledge or **gnosis** about how the light particles in their souls could be released from the dark matter imprisoning their true selves.
  - Human beings, given this structure of the universe, were not responsible for evil.

# Ambrosian underpinnings

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- Augustine was influenced by St. Ambrose to move away from simple literalism to a more nuanced allegorical approach to scripture.
  - In matters that are so obscure and far beyond our vision, we find in Holy Scripture passages which can be interpreted in very different ways without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such cases, we should not rush headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search for truth justly undermines the position, we will fall too.

# Neo-Platonic underpinnings

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- Augustine studied the Neo-Platonists, Plotinus and Porphyry, whose teachings included:
  - Philosophical life was participation in the divine life and served as a path to unification with the divine.
  - The One was the sustaining force of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.
  - All things are drawn toward the one and the soul's moral purity is a prerequisite to the ascent toward the one.



# Pauline underpinnings

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- Augustine rejected the Pagan equation of evil with ignorance, and embraced a Pauline understanding that we can know the good but reject it for evil unless we are helped by God's grace.
- Augustine observed human beings take a perverse delight in sinning.

# ‘Tolle, lege’: Take and read

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- Augustine converted to Catholic Christianity around 385-386 C.E. under influence of St. Ambrose:
  - “Oh God make me chaste, but not yet.”
  - Romans 13:13: “Not reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, spend no more thought on nature and nature’s appetites.”
- Divine grace and not human will liberates and saves human beings.

# Augustine's career

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- Augustine wanted to live the ascetic life of a philosopher, but abandoned it to take up the post of Bishop in Hippo where he battled external foes and internal heretics.
- Augustine died in 430 C.E., around the same time the Vandals were besieging Hippo.
- Augustine's writings are the true underpinnings of medieval Christian thinking.

# The Four Doctors of the Church

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- Jerome
- Ambrose
- Augustine
- Gregory the Great



# *De Doctrina Christiana* (c. 397—426 C.E.)

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- Central text to how medieval Christians interpreted scripture
- Platonic: there are things and signs used to symbolize those things
- Some signs are easily known; others are hidden to us
- Move from literal to figurative (allegorical) meanings

# Book IV of *de Doctrina*

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- Added a quarter century after original 3 books
- Connects Christian truth to eloquence and rhetoric
- Proper goal of rhetoric is to teach wisdom by use of eloquence

# The metaphor of pilgrimage

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- Suppose, then, we were wanderers in a strange country, and could not live happily away from our fatherland, and that we felt wretched in our wandering, and wished to put an end to our misery, determined to return home. We find, however, that we must make use of some conveyance, either by land or water, in order to reach that fatherland where our enjoyment is to commence. But the beauty of the country through which we pass, and the very pleasure of the motion, charm our hearts, and turning these things which we ought to use into objects of enjoyment, we become unwilling to hasten the end of our journey; and becoming engrossed in a factitious delight, our thoughts are diverted from that home whose delights would make us truly happy, Such is a picture of our condition in this life of mortality. We have wandered far from God; and if we wish to return to our father's home, this world must be used, not enjoyed, so that the invisible things of God may be clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made--that is, by means of what is material and temporary we may lay hold upon that which is spiritual and eternal.

# *The Confessions*

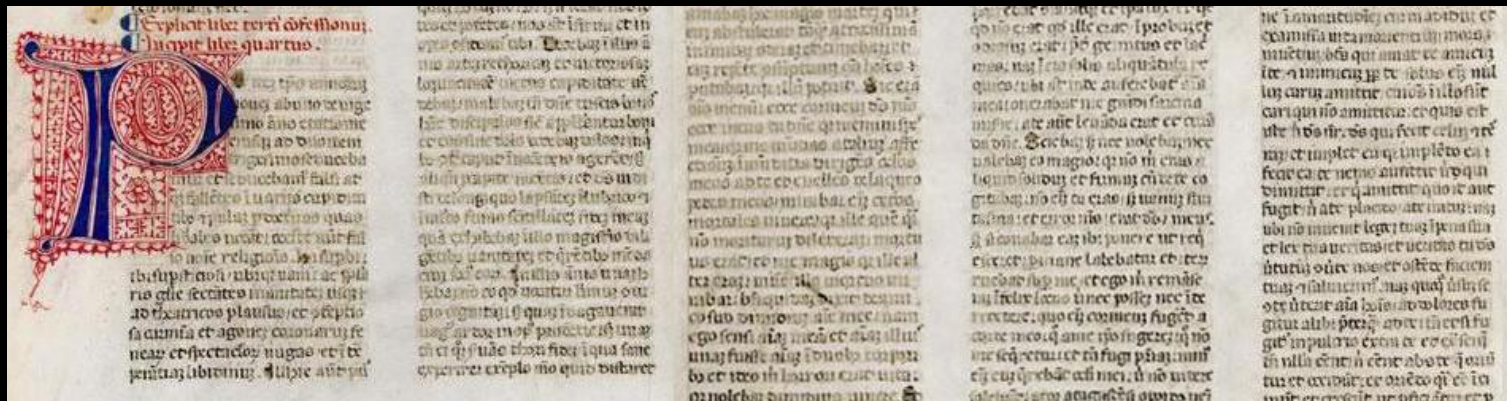
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- Often regarded as first autobiography, but not in modern sense
- Written at age 47; he lived to 75
- Not linear but moral—his journey from error to conversion and true acceptance of Christianity
- V. influential in many ways



# “Confession” as bearing witness

- ~~Not to be read as strictly ‘historical’~~
- Moves from the surface story to the metaphorical meaning beneath
- Widely copied and excerpted



# *The City of God (De civitate dei contra paganos)*

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- Written shortly after Visigoths sacked Rome (410 C.E.) as an examination of the conflicts between the City of Man and the City of God
- 22 books; part 1 (bks 1-10) critiques Roman culture and mores; part II examines the celestial and earthly Cities.

# The Two Cities, City of God, Book XIV, Chapter xxviii

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Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men but the greatest glory of other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lift up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God.

# “Mirror of a Christian Prince,” City of God, Book V, Chapter xxiv

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But we say that **they are happy if they rule justly**; if they are not lifted up amid the praises of those who pay them sublime honors, and the obsequiousness of those who salute them with an excessive humility, but remember that they are men; **they make their power the handmaid of His majesty by using it for the greatest possible extension of His worship**; if they fear, love, worship God; if more than their own they love that kingdom in which they are not afraid to have partners; if they are slow to punish, ready to pardon; if they apply that punishment as necessary to government and defense of the republic, and not in order to gratify their own enmity; if they grant pardon, not that iniquity may go unpunished, but with the hope that the transgressor may amend his ways; if they compensate with the lenity of mercy and the liberality of benevolence for whatever severity they may be compelled to decree; if their luxury is as much restrained as it might have been unrestrained; if they prefer to govern depraved desires rather than any nation whatever; and **if they do all these things, not through ardent desire of empty glory, but through love of eternal felicity, not neglecting to offer to the true God, who is their God, for their sins, the sacrifices of humility, contrition, and prayer.**

# The Concept of War

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- Augustine understands war to be a consequence of man's fallen state, but he argues for justice in war:
  - A great deal depends on the reasons why humans undertake wars and on the authority to begin a war. The natural order of the universe which seeks peace among humans must allow the king the power to enter into a war if he thinks it necessary. That same natural order commands that the soldiers should then perform their duty, protecting the peace and safety of the political community. When war is undertaken in accord with the will of God (the God who wishes to rebuke, humble, and crush malicious human beings), it must be just to wage it.

# Augustine codifies the system of four-fold exegesis (interpretation)

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- Start with the literal meaning
- Connect OT to NT
- Find the moral or typological significance
- Connect it to the divine (anagogical/eschatological) significance

# Four-Fold Exegesis

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- But lift up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it. And the children of Israel shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea.—Exodus 14.16
- Literal: the Israelites crossed it
- Typological: Christ's baptism
- Moral (Tropological): cross over life's difficulties into spiritual peace
- Anagogical: death to New Life

# Prefiguration

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- He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.—Isaiah 40:11
- I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.—John 10:11



# Interpretation

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- How would you move from the literal to the metaphorical interpretation of these passages?