

Paul Rigby, *The Theology of Augustine's Confessions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 340 pp., ISBN 978-1-10-709492-5, £67.00.

Paul RIGBY [= R.] in his new book on Augustine's *Confessions* has a bold objective of providing us with a fresh look at this "magic book", as he calls it in the opening sentence of the "Preface" (p. IX). Even though it may be a "magic book" not only for R., but for many other scholars and amateurs, the Canadian theologian claims that we all, in our post-Enlightenment or late modern outlook, have lost the ability to experience what he calls the "shocking freshness" of the *Confessions* (p. 2).

In an attempt to bring back some of this freshness, R. invokes several modern thinkers. His main framework is the thought of Paul RICOEUR, but he also cites, to a greater or lesser extent, KANT, HEGEL, NIETZSCHE, FREUD, HEIDEGGER and BENJAMIN. R. assumes that in order to hear and understand what Augustine has to say to us, we have to "cross-examine" him first, in the light of modern thought, which is so radically different from the bishop of Hippo's experience and view of the world.

R. identifies "five sets of problems where Augustine's testimony has become incredible for the modern reader" (p. 4). Those are: (1) the genre of the *Confessions*, the idea of *confessio* and of testimony in general; (2) a Freudian suspicion that Augustine's (as anyone else's, for that matter) belief in God is a sign of psychological immaturity and an unresolved Oedipus complex; (3) a similar suspicion of psychohistorians from the school of Heinz KOHUT, who understand Augustine's personality and his work in terms of his alleged narcissism; (4) the ideas of original sin, election, predestination and theodicy as largely rejected Augustinian legacy; and (5) celibate, marriage, and (male) community seen in the context of the Christian hope for resurrection. The largest space is given to the fourth set of problems (chapters 4–9), while others are dealt with within the scope of one or two chapters each.

In the first chapter ("*Confessio*") R. considers the meaning of *confessio* in terms of Jean NABERT's (via Paul RICOEUR) idea of a testimony as investing "a moment in history with an absolute character" (p. 15). The author tries to connect Augustine's mystical experiences, his notion of the Platonic, absolute and immutable Being, with the Christian view of history, the Scriptures and the intersection between the eternal and the temporal.

The problem of testimony (*scil.* God revealed in a personal history) becomes a starting point for examining a Freudian claim that Augustine's religious experience was an expression of unresolved, unconscious Oedipal conflicts (Chapter Two: "Fatherhood: From Neurotic Phantasm to Compassionate Symbol"). Here R. uses his work from the 1980s¹ to argue (against the view of many scholars, including, to mention at least one, Eric R. DODDS²) that Augustine did resolve the Oedipus complex in the *Confessions*. R. shows rather convincingly that the ending of the so called "autobiographical" part of the *Confessions* in Book Nine appears to be a successful working through his relationships with his mother and father. Both are seen positively, but realistically, and feelings towards them are sublimated in the context of Christian faith (the symbols of motherhood and fatherhood are displaced on the Church and God).

In the next chapter ("Narcissism and Narrative's Vital Lie") R. discusses Augustine's personality and work in terms of KOHUT's view of narcissism, particularly the need for "self-objects", that

¹ E.g. P. RIGBY, *Paul Ricoeur, Freudianism, and Augustine's "Confessions"*, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LIII 1985, pp. 93–114.

² E.R. DODDS, *Augustine's "Confessions": A Study of Spiritual Maladjustment*, *Hibbert Journal* XXVI 1927–1928, pp. 459–473.

is, for people who are viewed not as independent agents, but as mere instruments of maintaining the cohesion of the self. R. claims that neither God, nor the reader of the *Confessions* is a mere self-object to Augustine's fragmented self, but that his work intends in fact to build a Christian community and mature relationships between him and God, him and other Christians, in this way transcending his narcissistic needs. The author goes beyond the *Confessions*, discussing also Augustine's ordination in the year 391 and his conversion from the Platonic idealised, solitary life of seeking for timeless wisdom, towards a Christian, communal and self-giving life. Augustine's confessional narrative escapes from a naïve search for easy consolations.

Chapters Four to Nine focus on the original sin and predestination, and thus on the problem of evil and suffering in a good world created by a good God³. In Chapter Four ("Evil, Suffering, and Dualistic Wisdom") R. deals with the problem of evil and shows Augustine's way through Manichaeism and Platonism towards the "confessional Christianity", where the bishop of Hippo found out that "the involuntary and inscrutable nature of the origin of evil cannot be resolved theoretically in terms of ethical monotheism" (p. 91). In Chapter Five ("Original Sin: An Ineluctable Triple Hatred") the author discusses RICOEUR's critique of Augustine's position on the original sin and predestination (as anti-Gnosticism which becomes a form of Gnosticism) and presents the original sin as fundamental self-hatred or a triple hatred of God, truth and the self. In the next chapter ("Original Sin and the Human Tragic") R. tries to use hermeneutics to formulate Augustine's concept of the transmission of sin in terms of a transmission of "malevolence" through language and culture. He also argues that the bishop of Hippo is not trying to explain the beginning of evil, but rather to understand, ontologically, how evil exists in a good world. Ultimately, since evil is nothingness, it is impossible to see into its nature (it is similar to trying to see darkness or to hear silence). The chapter ends with an interesting discussion of the sad fate of unbaptised infants who, for Augustine, become inexplicable but "heartrending" figures of suffering itself.

In Chapter Seven ("The Platitudes of Ethical Monotheism") R. tries to show an inner tension in Augustine's theology, namely, the apparent inability to reconcile God's justice and mercy. The author is convinced that Augustine did manage to resolve the tension, but not within the scope of "ethical discourse". In the next chapter ("Inscrutable Wisdom") R. suggests that the solution lies in Augustine's confessional narrative, which contains three conversions. The result of the first one is "moral freedom", with its ethical realisation that God is just and we are responsible for our sins. The result of the second one is the "freedom of inscrutable wisdom", with a tragic sense of living in a world where we have to let go of our narcissistic demands. The result of the third and the last one is the "freedom to serve" and suffer for the sake of the community.

Chapter Nine ("The Lyrical Voice") pictures Augustine's "lyrical discourse" or his "economy of gift", the view of life as God's calling "Love me!". Here R. argues that Augustine transcended the tension of his theology of sin, justice, and grace, by building a narrative in which Christ's life is a paradigm for the life of the whole Christian community, and thus everyone's life can be told as a story of mercy, gift, and love. The next chapter ("The Life of a Bishop: Reinventing Plato's Celestial Clock, *Confessions* 11–13") deals with the idea that the *Confessions* as a literary work is intended to become a "world" for Augustine's community, which by its poetics "can enlarge and augment the horizon of their existence" (p. 201). R. emphasises the bishop of Hippo's transition from Platonic salvation in the present, immutable moment towards a Christian view of history, time, and narrative.

The final chapter of the book ("Resurrection and the Restless Heart") discusses the concepts of community and friendship. The "communitarian" (p. 215) aspect of the *Confessions* is highlighted, the bond of friendship representing the Church. R. also discusses Augustine's choice of celibacy and points out that, in his time, marriage did not give him the opportunity to seek the "loving participation in ideas" (p. 225). The bishop of Hippo did not flee from marriage, he fled from lust,

³ Cf. his earlier work: *Original Sin in Augustine's "Confessions"*, Ottawa 1987.

so, despite his critics, he did not despise women, sex or marriage itself. R. shows how Augustine reconciles the finite with the infinite in the context of resurrection and Christian hope. He concludes with emphasising that a kenotic self-giving, the gift of salvation, opens the way to lyrical freedom and the image of God, who does not manipulate our freedom, but is totally gracious, free and self-giving for all.

R.'s book is an interesting and valuable contribution to our understanding of many dimensions of the *Confessions* and of Augustine's thought in general. His project of showing Augustine in the light of his time and culture and, at the same time, of making his "voice" understandable to the later modern audience, has proved a successful one. But the book seems to be slightly "uneven", although R. tries to make a coherent whole of the psychohistorical studies in Augustine's alleged neurosis or narcissism, of the theological treatment of the original sin and predestination, and of his discussion of theological dimensions of narrative and literary genre. Occasionally, it seems that R.'s references to contemporary thinkers are somewhat redundant and they, at times at least, give an impression of being mere intellectual ornaments, distracting from his main argument.

The most interesting part of this study is R.'s attempt to show that Augustine develops three distinct ways of thinking about evil and God. The first one is a moral view of a just God and an evil humanity deserving to be justly punished. The second one is a tragic view of the mystery of God's decisions and the necessity to accept evil, suffering, and punishment without understanding why. The third one is a lyrical view of gracious and self-giving God who in Jesus Christ offers universal salvation. R. does not try to prove that the bishop of Hippo found a way to reconcile those different, even contradictory views. He also does not argue that Augustine lost his intellectual acumen in his old age and gave up in the face of unresolved issues of justice and mercy.

Instead, he makes an original and illuminating suggestion that those three views can be seen in a temporal sequence, as parts of a confessional narrative. The legalistic, moral position (associated with the Jews) and the tragic position (associated with the Greeks) are, within the narrative, like past epochs which were transcended and transformed by the newness of the Gospel, with its lyrical, gift-centred, kenotic message of Christ incarnated, dead, and resurrected.

I am not sure if the book in its entirety and the whole sophisticated methodological machinery is actually needed to present R.'s invaluable contribution. So, provocatively, it may be said: "it all could have been done in a more simple way". But perhaps R., in this very book, is quite like Augustine himself. He has time, he like to tell stories and imaginary dialogues, he is fond of digressions. It may not be to everyone's taste, but it is not unjustified and, certainly, not unpleasant.

Mateusz Stróżyński
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań