

**Introduction to the World, Life and Thought  
of  
St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430)**

CVSP 205

March 12, 2018

**I. Introductory remarks**

**II. The World of Augustine: Politics, Education and Religion**

-The world of the Late Roman Empire; beginning of decline.

“Christianization” of the Empire (Constantine conversion: A.D. 312)

-Widening gap between Greek and Latin learning -Multi-religious reality:

1. Stoicism: human happiness and dignity come from voluntary obedience to the universal law.

2. Mystery religions: e.g., Mithraism: communion with divinity and the idea of redeemer.

3. Manichaeism: Mani (ca. 216-276): a mixture of Persian, Oriental ideas with Christian ones. The world is a result of a primeval conflict between light and darkness; the goal of religion is to release the particles of light which Satan had stolen from the world of Light and imprisoned in man’s soul. Jesus, Buddha, the prophets and Mani have been sent to help in this task. The material world is basically evil.

4. Christianity: God is **Creator** out of nothing; God is **Redeemer** (Jesus of Nazareth = God revealing himself in a human being for the salvation of humanity).

**III. Who was Augustine (A.D. 354-430)?**

- North African Roman citizen; Christian mother, pagan father;
- Student of rhetoric in Carthage; follower of Manichaeism
- Teacher in Milan; meets Bishop Ambrose; existential and intellectual struggles
- Conversion to Christianity; return to Africa; priest, then bishop of Hippo for 34 years
- Wrote *Confessions* in A.D. 399.

**IV. Why is Augustine Important?**

A. The Formative Components of Augustine’s Thought

1. **Cicero, or the Roman Component:** search for meaning and happiness
2. **Mani, or the Persian/Oriental Component:** the mystery of evil; mystical and dualistic language
3. **Plato and Plotinus, or the Greek Philosophical Component:** understanding the “spiritual”; evil is not a substance.
4. **Christ and the Bible, or the Semitic/Christian Component:** faith is not against reason; evil originates in human will; the centrality of the will; the Logos as the principle of all reality and understanding; the idea of creation; providence not fortune

#### B. The Legacy of Augustine

1. The problematic of faith and reason
2. Western Christian mysticism and heart language: centrality of love and happiness as self-renunciation; language of feeling, but not irrational
3. Main authority for Catholicism (freedom and merit; authority of the church) and Protestantism (centrality of grace)
4. The doctrine “original sin”: human beings “are held down by a dead weight of personal and collective egotism” (Chadwick)
5. Reconciling Plato/Neo-Platonism and Christianity
6. Discoverer of the subconscious? Anticipated Freud?

#### V. *The Confessions*

- The meaning of “confession”: praise and penitence
- An autobiography of the heart; a dialogue with God

- Structure: Books I-IX: a kind of autobiography until his mother’s death

Books X-XIII: exposition of the first book of the Bible (genesis);  
Neo-Platonic analysis of memory, time and creation

The autobiographical sections (Books 1-9) illustrate a thesis restated in more theological dress in the last four books (10-13): the rational creature has turned away from God by neglect and rebellion, preferring external things and the illusion that happiness consists in bodily satisfaction. Therefore, the soul falls below its own level and disintegrates. But at the deepest abyss of the ego, the soul retains a longing for re-integration and completeness. This is realized in the love of God, and the example and expiation of Christ the mediator and proclaimer of that love: “...you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.” (Book I.1)

*G. Sabra*