

AUGUSTINE'S RELEVANCE FOR CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION. A DECONSTRUCTIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE READING OF AUGUSTINE

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Abstract: For young people, Augustine can have something of *mysterium fascinosum et tremendum*. His engaging personality and passionate life can, on the one hand, have a strong appealing force. On the other hand, some of his more extreme ideas can arouse opposition amongst the young. In order to determine the possible significance of Augustine as inspiration and subject for religious education today, the present article develops a double movement: (1) deconstruction and (2) construction. (1) Many pictures and even many prejudices exist of Augustine. Precisely the excellent case study offered to us by Augustine when he evaluates current prejudices of theologians and religious texts of our Christian tradition is in itself already a first element for establishing Augustine's contemporary relevance for religious education. (2) Once Augustine is stripped from prejudices and we have obtained a 'neutral' and historical correct view of his time, life and writings, we will understand the constructive interaction between context and content in Augustine, the theologian. Herein lies a second possible relevance of Augustine. Finally, we will constructively examine how Augustine's most fundamental intuitions - such as his ideas on grace - can be relevant for theological thought in general and current religious education in particular.

Keywords: Augustine of Hippo, contemporary religious education, deconstruction of prejudices, contextuality of theology, heteronomy.

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Resumen: Para los jóvenes, Agustín puede tener algo de *mysterium fascinosum et tremendum*. Su personalidad atractiva y su apasionada vida pueden, por un lado, tener una fuerza intensa de atracción. Por otro lado, algunas de sus ideas más extremas pueden suscitar la oposición entre los jóvenes. Con el fin de determinar la posible significación de Agustín como inspiración y tema de la educación religiosa de hoy, el presente artículo se desarrolla en una doble vertiente: (1) la deconstrucción y (2) la construcción. (1) Existen muchas imágenes e incluso muchos prejuicios sobre Agustín. Precisamente el excelente estudio de caso que se nos ofrece por Agustín en la evaluación de los prejuicios actuales de los teólogos y los textos religiosos de nuestra tradición cristiana es en sí mismo ya un primer elemento para establecer la relevancia contemporánea de Agustín para la educación religiosa. (2) Una vez que Agustín es despojado de los prejuicios y se ha obtenido una visión correcta, “neutral” e histórica de su tiempo, su vida y sus escritos, vamos a entender la interacción constructiva entre el contexto y el contenido en Agustín, el teólogo. He aquí una posible segunda relevancia de Agustín. Por último, vamos a examinar de manera constructiva cómo las intuiciones fundamentales de Agustín –como sus ideas sobre la gracia– pueden ser relevantes para la reflexión teológica en general y la educación religiosa actual en particular.

Palabras clave: Agustín de Hipona, la educación contemporánea religiosa, la deconstrucción de los prejuicios, la contextualidad de la teología, la heteronomía.

Augustine (354-430) found, after a long search and a personal conversion process, the truth in Christianity. He is often described as monk, bishop and theologian. He lived in a religious community that he had founded himself. For this community he had a written rule. This rule is to this day followed by many religious congregations and orders. Augustine was bishop of the city of Hippo. He took his pastoral responsibility as a bishop very seriously. Finally, he was also a very active thinker and writer. He wrote many theological treatises and books. These were often a response to theological discussions of his time.

What is the relevance of Augustine as a source of inspiration and as a topic for theological education today? To answer this question I propose a double movement: (1) one of deconstruction and (2) one of construction (Pollefeyt, Dupont & Debel, 2011).

(1) Because already during his lifetime Augustine received a prominent place within the history of Christianity and in the development of Western thought, and because after his death he was read, explained and interpreted over and over again, it is now, sixteen centuries after his death, often extremely difficult to maintain enough distance from him in order to form a picture of him in all historical and intellectual objectivity. There are many portrayals of him, and also many prejudices about him. To answer the



question of the possible meaning of Augustine for contemporary religious education, first of all one needs to examine and even deconstruct some of these prejudices. Which of these prejudices are true - to what extent can one rightly label as negative certain aspects of Augustine's thought - and which prejudices seem less correct, and may even contain kernels of positive elements? Precisely in doing this, using Augustine as a case study to evaluate existing prejudices of theologians of the past and religious texts of our tradition, lies the first relevance of Augustine for present-day religious education.

(2) Once the picture we have of Augustine has been stripped from our prejudices and we have obtained a more objective and correct outlook on his period, life and writings, we will first look into the constructive reciprocity and fruitful interaction between context and content in the theologian Augustine. A potential second relevance can be discerned here. Finally, we will see how one of his most fundamental basic intuitions - his ideas on grace - can be constructive and relevant to theological thought in general and current religious education in particular.

1. DECONSTRUCTION

1.1. *Great champion of orthodoxy*

In iconography, Augustine is sometimes depicted as a triumphant bishop, who tramples beneath his feet the so-called heretics and their writings with his doctrinal authority. He is generally depicted as the father of Catholic orthodoxy. To what extent this is indeed the case is the subject matter of specialised studies. The first point of deconstruction is that Augustine himself did not realise that he would become a standard for orthodoxy.

First of all, Augustine lived in a very diverse religious landscape. Christianity was not the only religious voice. The fact that believers from his bishopric still participated in pagan festivals was of great concern to him. This example illustrates that paganism certainly was not yet completely over and done with. Otherwise he would also not have thought it necessary to have reacted in his magisterial *City of God* against the pagan criticism saying that the fall of Rome in 411 was caused by the replacement of the pagan rites by Christianity and by the weakening of the Roman Empire by Christian morality (love of one's enemy, universal brotherhood, humility, meekness, patience...). Manichaeism was a very influential movement, witness the fact that Augustine himself had been an adherent of a Christian version of this movement, and that his Manichaean patrons had arranged his appointment as state professor of rhetoric in Milan.

Secondly, the Christianity of Augustine's time was anything but a monolithic whole. In North-Africa, the Roman province in which Augustine lived, Catholic Christianity



was at the time he became bishop, merely a minority Church. Donatism, a Christian schism, boasted having the majority of North-African Christians amongst its members. Only through support of the emperor, who condemned Donatism because this religious movement jeopardized the political unity of the Roman Empire, the North-African Catholic bishops - headed by Augustine - managed to prevail. Catholicism became the only permitted branch of Christianity, but Donatism remained present in a hidden way, until the rise of Islam expelled Christianity from North-Africa. When Augustine was lying on his deathbed, the Vandals were standing before the gates of Hippo, ready to conquer the city. These Vandals were Arian Christians: they did not believe Christ to be completely the same as the Father on the divine level, and they considered him to be an outstandingly virtuous man instead. This Arian position counted many adherents amongst the so-called 'barbarian' tribes who at the time were invading the Roman Empire from all sides, and who would form the basis for the creation of the peoples and countries within present-day Europe. Against this Arian subordinationism Augustine argued instead for the absolute equality of the three divine persons in his theological masterpiece *On the Trinity*.

Thirdly, also within Catholic Christianity there existed great theological diversity. The Pelagian controversy is a good example of this. In this controversy, Augustine arrives at the clear position that all the good in man's life is the result of God's grace, because man - weakened by Original Sin - is no longer capable of obtaining the good by himself. Augustine's 'Pelagian' opponents put before him the fundamental question: if everything is indeed grace, which role and responsibility is then left for human freedom? Initially, Augustine's ideas of an all-determining divine grace because of Original Sin did not meet with approval outside of North-Africa. In the East the bishops and the patriarch of Jerusalem sided with the 'Pelagians', while in the West also pope Zosimus did so at first. Only with the support of the emperor - who again feared that religious quarrel would disrupt the fragile political unity of the moribund Roman Empire -, Augustine succeeded in getting the West to condemn Pelagianism. Also after this condemnation Augustine's thoughts on grace and particularly on predestination (God has already determined beforehand that only a limited number of believers - regardless of their personal merit - will be saved) were not simply accepted in the Western Catholic Church outside of North-Africa, even during Augustine's lifetime. Prominent theologians such as John Cassian and Vincent of Lérins, and monastic communities from Gaul argued for instance that divine grace interacts with human responsibility, so that human freedom does have an essential role to play, and that every human being - and not just a limited predestinated number - can be saved. After Augustine's death, Catholic theologians such as Faustus of Riez, and councils such as those of Orange (529), Quierzy (853) and Valence (855) will reject the extreme consequences of Augustine's doctrine of predesti-



nation. Another example is the medieval creation of the concept of 'Limbo', the edge of Hell, where unbaptised infants and virtuous pagan philosophers were being kept. This concept is entirely at odds with Augustine's view on grace, in which unbaptized infants and virtuous pagan philosophers are placed in hell and not in a separate place apart from heaven and hell.

In short, the fact that Catholic Christianity in the West would gain the upper hand and that Augustine's ideas would exert such a big influence in defining Catholic theology was not evident for his contemporaries - and neither for Augustine himself. The presentation of Augustine as father of Christian theology is the result of a development which took place after Augustine's death. In other words, it would be anachronistic to read Augustine from this conception. He was not a self-confident champion of orthodoxy, but rather a very humble and open searcher for truth and happiness. Further, the religious diversity of the period, of which Augustine himself was a product, is very comparable with our present-day religious plurality. This first deconstruction has in other words revealed a clear similarity between Augustine and our present situation (Brown, P., 1973; Chadwick, H., 1998).

1.2. Father of the idea of 'holy war' and the Inquisition

Augustine has sometimes been reproached for being the inspiration of the idea of a 'holy war', and to have given the initial impetus to the Inquisition. These are serious charges which have to be investigated carefully.

a. War

Despite the great importance which Augustine attaches to peace, he permits war in a limited number of cases. Striving after peace, after harmonious justice, can justify war. A war can, according to Augustine, only be justified if that war meets three requirements: accepted by a legitimate authority, with the motive to remedy an injustice, with the right intention. Only official authorities are capable of deciding on war and this with the right intention. These are the criteria which today also the UN follows when deciding on humanitarian interventions. In the past, there have been scholars who have extrapolated certain aspects of Augustine's ideas about war to legitimize, for instance, the crusades or the idea of a 'holy war', a war to spread the purported true faith by force of arms. Augustine himself rejected such a legitimization of a religious war. Furthermore, he was utterly convinced that nobody can be converted against his will (Holmes, R. I., 1997; Markus, R. A., Lenihan, D. A., 1980).



b. Religious coercion

Donatism divided the North-African Church. Donatists and Catholics were sometimes literally at daggers drawn. To end this disunity, the emperor decided to force the Donatists to convert to the Catholic faith through coercive measures, from confiscation of their goods, declaring null and void their inheritances, and imposing fines, to the use of flogging, and even the death penalty for Donatists who had committed acts of violence. Initially, Augustine was against any use of coercion to convert the Donatists. He believed this to be counterproductive. He thought that Donatists should be persuaded through argumentation of the Catholic faith's truth. Throughout his life he would remain faithful to this view. He would also unceasingly oppose the use of torture and the death penalty. He will though, pressured by his fellow bishops who were in favour of coercive measures, disappointed by the fact that the Donatists stubbornly refused every form of negotiation and consensus, and intimidated by the increased use of violence by the Donatists (especially committed by the *circumcellions*, an armed bloodthirsty private militia with links to the Donatist camp), come to the acceptance of a moderate form of coercive measures: fines, on condition that the punished would be left with sufficient money to live on, and the use of flogging - in a moderate form - as was customary within a civil jurisdiction in that time. Augustine is the last Roman-Catholic bishop to accept this use of religious coercion for the Donatists. Concerning the other Christian movements which were schismatic or heretical in his eyes, in relation to non-Christians as Manichaeans, pagans and Jews, he was never of the opinion that they should be compelled to convert to the Catholic faith. Augustine thus accepts religious coercive measures, but historical research tells us that this acceptance was motivated by the specific violent context of the Donatist controversy, that this coercion is only valid for the particular case of the Donatists, and that Augustine laid down strict conditions for it (Jans, H., 1961; Crasmück, E. El., 1964; Crespin, R., 1965; Lamirande, E., 1975; Burt, D. X., 1987; Himbury, M., 1990; Brown, P., 1997).

c. Evaluation

In other words, we have to admit that Augustine indeed supported a form of legitimate just war and limited religious coercion. To call him the father of the 'holy war' and of the inquisition, is, however, going a step too far. In this sense, the example of Augustine teaches us that a distinction should be made between a theologian's original thought and later interpretations and recuperations of it. Furthermore, this second deconstruction points again towards a religious plurality of Christianity in Late Antiquity, and brings to the fore the contemporary question of what we should do with the religious 'other'.



1.3. *Suppression of women*

A negative perception of Augustine exists in that he did not think highly of the women of his time and of women in general. In this context, one often refers to the fact that he sent away his unnamed concubine because she prevented him from rising up the social ladder due to her low birth. Actually, it was Augustine's mother, Monnica, who took this decision. Later in life, when a bishop, he will admit that he always loved this woman, "where she touched my heart, it kept on bleeding" (*Saint Augustin Confessions*, 6, 25). Historical research of Augustine's life, writings and the social context in his time, teaches us that he did not have a negative outlook on women, on the contrary.

He points out how important Monnica as well as his concubine were for him in his life. He draws attention to the central role Monnica played in his conversion, and for his concubine he did not cease to show love and respect. Both were strong women, from whom he received a positive and even emancipatory view on women. That Augustine treated women as equals is shown in his elaborate correspondence with women, such as Proba, Juliana, Melania the Older, and the Younger, Sapida, Italica, Paulina and many other women. Theoretically, this resulted in Augustine's novel theological idea that woman, just as man, was created in the image of God, that also her soul is an *imago Dei*, and that she will resurrect in a female body. Many theologians in those days believed - following the literal reading of the Creation story - that God created man first and that therefore he is the original image of God. These theologians were in line with philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato, who considered women as 'imperfect men'. Christian theologians thought likewise, that woman is merely a derivative creation of man. If a woman wants to be saved, then she first has to become a man. Consequently, women will receive a male body at the resurrection. Augustine, on the other hand, posits that female and male are each other's equal in the Creation order. God created them as absolutely equal to each other. They are also equal in salvation history. In particular, the Hellenistic theology emphasised that for the Fall in Paradise, the woman was entirely to blame. Augustine, however, argues that man and woman both sinned in the same way in Paradise, by giving in to pride by thinking that they were able to live without God. Man and woman not only share the same primal guilt, they also have the same share in the salvation of human beings. Not only that, from this perspective, Augustine has a greater esteem for the virtuousness of women than of men, because men - according to Augustine - are much more driven by their *libido* (lust, desire), while women are more guided by *caritas* (Christian love). For Augustine, this creation and salvation equality results in - certainly in theory - equal rights and duties within marriage. According to Augustine, man and wife are on the same footing within marriage.



Regarding the social status of women, Augustine remains a child of his time. Their role was mainly limited to being a mother, and raising children within the Christian faith. The latter is, according to him, the essence of a Christian marriage. Some women of Augustine's time broke through this social pattern. He corresponded with this category of leading women. They were, however, either widows or consecrated virgins, mostly from wealthy families, who, because of their - in those times - religious statute of widowhood or virginity, were released from their obligation to be a wife and mother.

This third deconstruction shows that on the one hand Augustine held, on a theoretical level, ideas about women which were well ahead of his time, but on the other hand he accepted in practice the socially subordinate status of women (Børresen, K. E., 1990; Matter, E. A., 1990; Børresen, K. E., 1994; Seelbach, L. C., 2002; Kiesel, D., 2008).

1.4. *Suppressor of sexuality*

Augustine is sometimes jokingly described as 'the poacher who turned forester', someone who first led a promiscuous life and then forbade sexuality for everybody. The charge of promiscuity, though, is an exaggeration. He remained faithful to his concubine. When his mother sent her away in order to arrange an advantageous marriage for her son, Augustine, in anticipation of this marriage, temporarily began a new relationship. In response to these two relationships he elaborately describes that as a young man he could only renounce his sexuality with tremendous effort. He considered continence and celibacy the best way of being a Christian - more on this later -, but he found it extremely difficult to realise this ideal.

More generally it has been said that the negative attitude of the Catholic Church towards sexuality is rooted in Augustine's approach to sexuality. However, a historical-critical analysis tells us that this is partly a clouded interpretation. At the time of Augustine there was a strong ascetic trend, propagated by, among others, Jerome, who posited that celibacy was the only permitted way of life, and that all sexuality was in any case sinful, also within marriage. Augustine reacts against this position. Next to celibacy there is a Christian status of marriage. Within this marriage - and only within this marriage - sexuality with a view to procreation, as expression of mutual loyalty and a sacrament of unity, is permitted. In other words, according to Augustine sexuality is not by definition negatively used, as many of his contemporaries believed. Yet, he is much stricter in this than current Christian conjugal ethics. In fact, he reduces sexuality to producing children, and he does not accept marital sexuality as valuable in itself. He posits that sexuality can be used for the good, but sexuality *an sich* he finds rather negative.



Augustine's negative interpretation of sexuality is prompted by his ideas on Original Sin. Theologically he considers sexuality to be contaminated by Adam: precisely through the physical act of sexuality and the psychological aspect of sexual desire, Original Sin is being passed on from generation to generation. God created marriage and sexuality good and instituted this in paradise. Through the Fall, man has damaged this sexuality. Consequently, this damaged sexuality - which was originally good, but then marred by the Fall - is, according to Augustine, something negative. Within marriage, and under strict conditions, sexuality can be used to the good. Julian of Aeclanum, a contemporary of Augustine, who considered him a 'Pelagian', already rejected this bond between sexuality and Original Sin. Julian argued that sexuality and sexual desire - within marriage - were naturally good, created good by God and unaffected by Adam's Fall.

Augustine accepts marriage as good, but values celibacy higher. Moreover, he prefers a specific Christian interpretation of marriage. Once the child wish is fulfilled, he advises married couples to abstain from sexuality. When they find it difficult to abstain, he allows them sexuality. Because sexuality is not aimed at procreation in this case, he considers it a sin, albeit a small, daily sin, which is used to prevent one of the partners from committing adultery, which would be considered a deadly sin.

To conclude: Augustine approached sexuality more positively than many of his rigorous contemporaries. His analysis that sexuality is not just a neutral given fact, but that it can encroach deeply, both psychologically and emotionally, upon a human life, is something that we accept today as well. This fourth deconstruction has shown that the prejudice in respect to Augustine's attitude towards sexuality needs to be partially nuanced and contextualized. Likewise, we came via this analysis to the finding that Augustine *in globo* is - certainly when compared to our contemporary feeling and to the conjugal teachings of the Church today - rather negative, reductive, and instrumentary in his view on sexuality and marriage. This can also be an important lesson for religious teaching. Not all avenues of explorations from important or influential thinkers have to be followed. The respect we cherish for the founders of our theology does not imply that we have to completely adopt all their ideas without question (Hunter, D. G., 1990; Clark, E., 1996; Burnell, P., 1999; Lamberigts, M., 2000; Clark, E., 2006).

1.5. *Short assessment of the historical-critical deconstruction: positive and negative*

The deconstruction of prejudices concerning Augustine tells us that prevalent opinions on theologians and their texts should always be placed in their historical and intellectual context and disconnected from later interpretations. This deconstruction re-



vealed more intrinsically that not all prejudices are correct. Augustine was not a megalomaniacal champion of orthodoxy, but a committed and fervent searcher for truth within an extensive spectrum of Christian movements and theological outlooks. His ideas of peace, justice, religious tolerance, woman and sexuality are certainly not as negative as they are often presented. On the contrary, they contain many positive impulses. At the same time, we also have to admit that Augustine's ideas, despite these positive intentions, also contain problematic elements which are no longer justifiable: the view on sexuality as intrinsically sinful, the condemnation of unbaptised babies and virtuous adherents of other religions to hell, reducing the love of God to a limited number of predestined faithful. The least we can conclude in other words is that Augustine invites to debate on issues which have not lost their strength up to the present day.

2. CONSTRUCTION

2.1. *Concrete context of pursuing theology*

Augustine was not only an abstract theologian, or in fact, he was anything but. Thanks to his *Confessions*, his 308 letters and approximately 1000 sermons and much personal information in his books, we know him also as a very tangible person. He could be cold or hot, he could be ill, suffer from his lungs or from a headache, he could be tired, angry and sad or happy and glad, he could fall in love and feel the pangs of love, he could sin. He describes himself in his own words like this. He does not put himself on a pedestal. On the contrary, we get to know him as a human being of flesh and blood. What is more, he indicates himself that it is this concrete man, influenced by day-to-day events, who practices theology. He shows in other words - by always linking his theological thinking with his personal story - that theology is not something abstract, but embedded in a theologian's personal life and in concrete historical events.

Historians actually point out that Augustine developed his theology in order to answer concrete questions and specific challenges. The fundamental questions that Manichaeism put to Christianity obliged Augustine to think about how the evil in the world can be reconciled with a benevolent God and how passages from the Old Testament about a cruel God should be understood. In response to the sharp attacks and fierce reproaches of Donatism, Augustine formulated the Catholic teaching on the value of martyrdom during the early persecutions of Christians, the meaning of Christian baptism, the role and meaning of the minister in administering the sacraments and the need for a forgiving Church which should never cast out sinners. Historians also agree that Augustine probably would not have systematically developed his doctrine of grace as he



did - after which he was called *doctor gratiae* (teacher of grace) - if the 'Pelagians' had not explicitly made enquiries about this. His thoughts on the Trinity - gathered in his *On the Trinity*, a work which would deeply influence Western theology - were written to refute the, in his time, popular Arian ideas. The *City of God*, the treatise in which Augustine develops his thoughts on the difference between the 'earthly city' and the 'heavenly city' - which is at the basis of our ideas of the separation between Church and state - was written as a reply to the accusation of the pagans that the city of Rome could be conquered in 411 by the Visigoths, because the Roman Empire had replaced the worship of the pagan gods by Christianity, and this Christian religion had weakened the Roman *virtus*.

This concrete embedding of theological thinking is not without danger. This insight is aptly illustrated by Augustine's thinking. The polemic approach of many of his thoughts results at times in a black-and-white-thinking, a closed discourse out of which Augustine himself could not break away. This closed systematic thinking causes Augustine to assign unbaptised babies to hell, to think that God does not take human merit into consideration at all, to believe that only a strict number of Christians will be saved by God, and not to value conjugal sexuality positively.

In short, Augustine's ideas are instructive for religious education, seeing that it shows the concrete embedding of every religious and theological thinking, and this in its positive greatness as well as in its negative limitations. This insight in the contextualization of theology and religion is today a given fact and is already applied in religious education on the Bible, the Koran... What unique input does Augustine then offer? Augustine is the Christian author - certainly of Antiquity - of which we possess the most complete overview of concrete events and of the historical context of his life, through which the interaction between context and content continuously lights up. This can, for instance, explain the success of the *Confessions*, one of the most translated and published books in the West, a book which without a doubt belongs to the canon of Western literature.

Augustine is himself very much aware of his contextual situation. Also, he realizes that his thinking underwent an evolution, and that his ideas were developed through discussions with his opponents. He readily admits that as a young theologian he did not think in the same way as an older and more experienced bishop. This self-criticism is formalised in a work called *Reconsiderations*, which he wrote near the end of his life and in which he chronologically goes over all of his writings and corrects the mistakes he made. Moreover, he recommends that wherever he may have erred, people can correct his thinking. He himself writes in another little work at the end of his life, titled *The gift of perseverance*:

And yet, I would not want anyone to embrace all my views in order to be my follower, but only those points on which he sees that I am not mistaken. [...] I have not always



held the same views, rather, I think that, as I wrote, I made progress by the mercy of God, but not that I have started off with perfection. [...] We can, of course, have good hope for someone if the last day of this life finds him making progress¹.

2.2. Awareness of heteronomy

In the already mentioned Pelagian controversy, Augustine stated that the ‘Pelagians’ placed too much stress on human activity, human free choice and human independence, thereby forgetting that every human being always needs the help of God’s grace (*gratia*) in whatever he does. Without divine help a good life is impossible. In Augustine’s eyes they too strongly emphasise human independence (autonomy) and thereby overlook that a human being is in essence dependent on God (heteronomy). According to Augustine, mankind has become a helpless child after the Fall because of the universal human sinfulness is in need of an all-inclusive grace: mankind has to be supported constantly by grace in everything. The central point of Augustine’s thought is Original Sin. The idea of Original Sin was already present *in nucleo* amongst earlier thinkers, such as Tertullian and Cyprian, but within the theological discourse of his time it was actually a rather innovative concept, in the sense that one had not thought systematically about it. Original Sin means to Augustine Adam’s sin (to which entire humankind has participated) as well as the consequences of this sin, which are passed on through the generations, so that every human being is born in a guilty condition, with a ‘damaged/flawed nature’. These consequences are mortality and the *concupiscentia carnalis* (the desire to sin). Baptism in Christ washes away all sins, and therefore also this Original Sin. However, after baptism, the desire to sin remains, against which man can do nothing without God’s constant grace. Grace is God’s answer to human sinfulness. For Augustine this grace possesses three essential characteristics. (1) Christ’s grace is absolutely necessary. Everybody needs at every moment God’s help. Without Christ’s grace one cannot be saved. The reason for this is the sinfulness of the whole of mankind, including even the smallest ones. (2) The idea that the whole of mankind is sinful also means that mankind did not deserve the coming of Christ and his salvation. Grace is, according to Augustine, per definition given absolutely gratis and received undeservedly. Furthermore, mankind deserves nothing but punishment. (3) God always takes the first initiative. Belief in Christ is necessary to be saved. This belief presupposes a good will. Mankind, turned away from God ever since the Fall, cannot turn himself to God on his own. God himself does this. Because

¹ *On the gift of perseverance* 21, 55. Translator: TESKE, R. J. (1999) *Translation for the 21st century; Answer to the Pelagians*, Vol. 4. Hyde Park, New York: New City Press: 229-230.



of the Fall, mankind is incapable of having a relationship with God. God makes it possible for a human being to come to belief. The good will of a human being follows upon grace, it does not precede grace, otherwise that grace would be a merit or a reward. God's initiative to love requires mutual love. This divine love makes it possible to do the good. Belief, a good will, righteous acts, love, are all gifts of God's grace to humanity.

Central in Augustine's thinking is grace. This is, seen from a theological point of view, a very complex concept. Despite this complexity, Augustine's ideas on grace can be a stimulus for contemporary religious education to reflect on the heteronomy which affects every human life in many ways, and it can be a stepping stone to reflections on alterity and transcendence.

The *Confessions* relate Augustine's wanderings and temptations, the Odyssey of his soul to God. It consists of a collection of reflections over his search and conversion. He describes his inner struggle openheartedly. At the same time, Augustine wants to depict every human being's situation. His heavy and emotional use of language concerning his sins and sinfulness does not refer to criminals, murderers, adulterers, thieves. No, with sinfulness he conveys the feeling of having gone astray, being lost, estranged from oneself, being hopelessly stuck. Looking back later in life at such an episode, one could ask oneself the question: how did I ever get out of this, how was it still possible to build up a future? Augustine's answer to this question is: thanks to God's grace. Grace is on the one hand finding the insight that you have lost your way, on the other hand finding the way back. From Augustine's point of view, this grace is given to him by God. Even though according to Augustine God takes the initial step, he does not completely deny human activity. Man has to want to make himself receptive. Augustine's view on humanity is formed by his ideas on grace. Without grace man cannot live. This is, in other words, heteronomy.

Heteronomy forms the basis and fundament of human life according to the bishop of Hippo. Yet, it is not entirely a case of either heteronomy or autonomy, in which the one would exclude the other. For Augustine, God's grace does not destroy human freedom and responsibility. Man has his own role to play. Yet, grace comes first. God's grace is actually the frame in which human freedom happens and develops. Even more, God's grace makes human freedom possible. In this sense, it can be claimed that human autonomy is built on heteronomy through God.

Augustine does not exclude human autonomy. Yet, he finds that few people can handle that autonomy, can reach that autonomy. Many are 'addicted' to their worldly life. This is, according to Augustine, wrong in two ways. Firstly, such people let their life be dictated by the world instead of by God, by creatures instead of the Creator. And that is according to Augustine an incorrect form of heteronomy, it is a sin. The world has taken the place of God (idolatry). Secondly, it is a wrong form of autonomy, because it



does not acknowledge the alterity of God and one's fellow human being, it is egoism and egocentrism. The 'I' takes up the place of God, and this is pride.

In short, Augustine is looking for a balance between the good forms of heteronomy and autonomy. Good autonomy is built on heteronomy. This is one of Augustine's discoveries in his *Confessions*. He who is not with God is outside himself. In other words, there can only be a self in relation to God. Through God I am 'myself'. The insight into this heteronomous autonomy of human life and the capacity to live by it is, according to Augustine, also the result of grace.

The relationship of the self to God is marked by grace. This is also the case for the mutual relations between human beings. After Augustine has discovered the heteronomy in his own life, he understands also that heteronomy is the essence of a relationship with one another. That heteronomy occurs in two areas, which are intrinsically interwoven with each other. Firstly, the other human being is essentially different: the ungraspable, uncontainable, uncontrollable other. That otherness has to be recognised in order to arrive at a fully fledged relationship. Secondly, that otherness of the other human being symbolizes the other with a capital: God. Every human relationship is not a purpose in itself, but refers further to God. It is, moreover, God's grace which is the foundation of the mutual relation between people.

God is helpfully and supportively present in the life of every human being and in the mutual relation between people. This is simply said Augustine's concept of grace, the Christian thinking on heteronomy and alterity. When speaking of this central concept of Christian thought it is necessary to refer to one of the pioneers in formulating the meaning of this concept, namely Augustine. This is certainly no evident subject. Yet, the link with the day-to-day experience of students can be clearly established. Everybody experiences the positive as well as the negative forms of heteronomy, of elements which surpass one's own control: sickness, mortality, broken relations – the beauty of creation, friendship, the birth of a baby, love. Furthermore, and here perhaps the greatness of Augustine should be situated, he describes in his *Confessions* and in his other writings how he himself was looking for the wrong kind of autonomy, how healing heteronomy reached into his life and how he succeeded in matching his autonomy with this heteronomy of God's grace.

3. AUGUSTINE AS SOURCE OF INSPIRATION AND AS A TOPIC FOR PRESENT-DAY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The Church Father Augustine is a great authority within theological thought and he is an important voice within our Christian tradition. Derived from the Latin *tradere*, 'to hand over', the word 'tradition' as such relates to what is being handed over, the so-called



traditum. In other words, 'tradition' refers to a dynamic event in which people participate by what they think is valuable by giving it to others, who in turn interact with what is handed over to them. As a consequence of this one could state that 'tradition' is not something which can stand on its own with a fixed or closed meaning: it only exists because people passed it on to each other in a concrete context in which tradition becomes meaningful, and each time it comes to life again. Teachers of Roman-Catholic religion in the secularized and pluralistic context of contemporary religious education face the challenge of maintaining 'tradition' through dialogue with their students; these, in turn, contribute with philosophical and existential questions. They bring the living water of the rich source of our tradition to slake the thirst of our pupils of today.

Against this background this contribution aimed at rediscovering Augustine, a central authority in the Christian tradition, as a source of inspiration and meaning in the context of religious education. The hermeneutic-communicative dynamic, which occurs in the classrooms, does not differ in essence from the way in which Christianity has developed itself in ever changing contexts throughout the ages. By bringing Augustine into the picture, this contribution hoped to demonstrate that he, from his own life story and in his own juncture, has revived his religious tradition: to the dough handed over to him, he added the yeast of inspiration which was given to him, and in so doing he offered religious food to a new generation. Finally, to conclude, we bring together a few constructive lines of thoughts for contemporary religious education, to which Augustine inspires us.

Augustine showed us firstly that he - himself contextually situated - has always been approached contextually. The knowledge of our Christian tradition is determined by the perspective from which we approach reality. The way in which we have looked at Augustine in this contribution does not only enable us to gain access to the bishop of Hippo himself of 16 centuries ago - to the degree that this is possible -, but also to the picture of him that we have received and created, or even better, to the contextually situated portrayals which have developed around him out of the frames of interpretations already formed by his readers and determined by the era in which they lived. Augustine's picture is not rarely determined by specific negative representations, but which do not stand the test - or only partly so - of critically reading his work or works written by his contemporaries. We have seen that the representation of Augustine as suppressor of women, as founding father of the Inquisition and the concept of a 'holy war', and as victor of orthodoxy is indeed rooted in some aspects of the voluminous oeuvre of this influential thinker, but at the same time it also reflects a recuperation from later times, in which the complexity of his reflections were reduced because of specific aims. Furthermore, our reading of Augustine in this contribution - via deconstruction arriving at construction - is clearly a child of the postmodern age we live in.



Secondly, we discovered the contextualization of Augustine's life and thought. Although it emerges that certain generalizations of Augustine's doctrines are not entirely unjust, it became also clear from a detailed study of his voluminous oeuvre, that his ideas are rooted in the historical context of those days in which he lived. Furthermore, at certain points he even goes against the dominant discourse of his time, for instance when he stresses that a woman is as much an image of God as a man or when he refuses to go along with certain views on the doctrine of grace. Of course these findings in no way offer an excuse for the more controversial aspects of his thought, but they do contribute to contextualizing his theological position. Briefly, although Augustine has gone into the records of history as the originator and victor of the infallible orthodoxy, a critical reading of his treatises show that theological reflection is always embedded in a concrete historical context and is influenced by the concrete events in the life of the theologian. Augustine was a context-involved thinker and doer. He was anything but a stranger to life. In his own way he sought for meaningful answers in response to the challenges which the complex reality posed at him, and he tried to change the concrete reality for the better, in dialogue with the context in which he lived. In Augustine's writings no abstract thinker, but a concrete human being comes to the fore, whose considerations were deeply determined by the concrete philosophical-theological debates and pastoral needs of his time. From his personal spiritual experience, from his experiences as a bishop and from his concern for the well being of his Church as a whole he attempted to formulate an answer to these challenges.

Thirdly, despite his involvement in the concrete reality in which he lived, Augustine's thoughts and deeds were pervaded with openness to transcendence. He explicitly opened his mind for that what surpasses reality. Belief in a transcendent reality was even the corner stone of his thought, and the source of inspiration of his deeds. Augustine described this both concrete experience minded - how God's everything surpassing grace had been at work in his own life -, and theoretical dogmatic - mankind's essential and absolute need for God's grace. Augustine's reflections are permeated by God's commitment for mankind, God who always remains close to man in his grace.

At a meta-level, we found that Augustine very clearly presented himself within the Catholic tradition. Within this tradition, Augustine was, in a loyal way, very creative. The doctrine of Original Sin - intrinsically intertwined with his doctrine of grace: God's grace is His answer to human sinfulness - was actually innovating within the existing theology of his time. In this respect Augustine developed new perspectives in dialogue with Scripture and with the reflections of his predecessors. A creative faithfulness to and within tradition is in other words the fourth lesson which Augustine can teach us.

Finally, in this way Augustine reveals the dynamics of a living tradition. He entered into a dialogue with the tradition from the past handed down to him, with his eyes on



the future. He reaches back to the richness of the past as answer to the pressing theological and pastoral needs of his time. This way he created a new synthesis in which the past is intertwined in a creative way with the innovativeness of the present, in order to transform in such a way what has been passed on, so that it is better prepared to be entrusted to the care of future generations. In this way he succeeded in making the religious tradition which he received pertinent for his time. Likewise, we can today make his ideas relevant for students today - in the classroom and for the faithful pupils we all are within the *schola ecclesiae* with Christ as our *magister*.

To conclude, Augustine's genuine honesty, his attempt to understand the heteronomy of human life, his passionate search for truth and justice, all this within a religious-pluralistic juncture very similar to our own, can, on the one hand, have a strong appeal to young people and the faithful. On the other hand, some of his conceptions taken to their extreme consequences – Original Sin, predestination, and sinful sexuality - can arouse opposition. This double feeling which Augustine can arouse teaches us the important lesson that theological authors and writings have to be read as objectively as possible - without any presumptions - and in the full knowledge of their original aim and their historical context. Only in this way can their rich content - such as Augustine's intuition about grace - be discovered in a way that is meaningful even today. Here lies the significance of Augustine as a study subject for religious education at present.

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