

AFRICAN CHURCH FATHERS AND ORTHODOXY OF FAITH: LESSONS FROM THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

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Abstract

The African man has been a gift to the world in all spheres of life. In the economic, social, cultural, scientific and technological development, Africans have been great pivots who determine the indices. In the ecclesiastical world, Africans have distinguished themselves through their contributions in helping the church navigate through her times of crises, hardship and heresies among others. In other words, in the midst of this present challenges facing the church – the challenge of accepting homosexual and lesbians as normal Christians, the challenge of allowing the homosexuals and lesbians into the ordain ministry, the issue of corruptions among church leaders, the African church needs not to be cowed into accepting unscriptural doctrines rather the church in African should to go down the memory lane in order to understand their position and duty which it owe God and humanity in safeguarding the authentic gospel and tradition of the church from being overrun by heretic teachings. In such case, the African church in contemporary times must imbibe the roles played by the earliest church fathers in African especially St. Augustine towards the church of their times and in view of that rise up to the present challenges confronting the modern church. Hence, this work is centered on the contributions of St. Augustine to the church as a way of appraising the position of the present African Church. This study applied historical phenomenological approach of inquiry.

Introduction

The contribution of St. Augustine towards the development of the present church cannot be denied. His works and contributions in the formation of the church doctrine, ecclesiastical structure and their zeal in fighting heretical teachings in their time cannot be over emphasized. It is evidently clear that the present church and her theological stand rest upon the wheel chair of the African Church fathers whose blood were shed in many cases for the church of God to march on. In other words the bloods of the African church fathers were among the great seed for the survival of the contemporary church.

St Augustine was a Father of the Church whose writings are considered very influential in the development of Western Christianity and philosophy. He was bishop of Hippo Regius (present-day Annaba, Algeria) of the Roman province of Africa and in this vein. Eugene (1970) quotes Jerome in one his contemporary as saying that he “established anew the ancient Faith” (p. 343). In support of Eugene, Sample (2001) opines that one of Augustine’s most important contributions to both the Christian church and to Western culture is his voluminous body of writings. He was one of the most prolific authors of antiquity. Of his vast literary output, 113 books and treatises, more than 200 letters, and over 500 written sermons survive. In fact, Augustine wrote three of the most important theological, philosophical, and apologetic works in history. These same three works have also become literary classics of Western civilization. They are the *Confessions*, *The City of God*, and *On the Trinity*. Therefore, it has become imperative for Africans at present to rise up to the numerous challenges facing the church not only speaking out as they do in their vitality against liberal teachings like gay rights, homosexuality, lesbianism and abortion among others but despite that, there is an urgent need for the present church leaders and theologians in Africa to be encouraged by contributions of past African theologians to the church in times of critical moments so as to be motivated to do more. By so doing, African church will maintain their position as heroes of orthodoxy in the comity of churches.

Understanding the Background of Augustine

Augustine was born at the 4th century AD when the line between faith and philosophy was becoming confused. His parents were an example; for both were at opposite ends of the spectrum. His mother, Monica, was a devoted Roman Catholic while his father, Patricius, was a pagan who wanted his son to have a classical education in philosophy. However, while Patricius encouraged his son in that direction, Monica made an obvious attempt to instill knowledge of the scriptures and church teaching into her son. But at this point in the young man’s life, philosophy won the day.

For Wells (2000), Augustine is from the Latin: *Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis*. While for Mackendrick (1980), “Augustine was born in 324 in the municipium of Thagaste (now Souk Ahras, Algeria) in Roman Africa. His father, Patricius, was a pagan, and his mother, Monica, was a Christian” (p.326). Scholars believe that Augustine's ancestors included Berbers, Latins and Phoenicians and in support, Lanncel (2002) explains that “Augustine’s family name, Aurelius, suggests that his father's ancestors were freedmen of the *gens Aurelia* given full Roman citizenship by the Edict of Caracalla in 212; Augustine’s family had been Roman, from a legal standpoint, for at least a century when he was born” (p.5). Leith (1990) and Hollingworth (2013) agree that Augustine and his family were Berbers,

an ethnic group indigenous to North Africa, but were heavily Romanized, speaking only Latin at home as a matter of pride and dignity. In his writings, Augustine leaves some information as to the consciousness of his African heritage.

In other words, it is believed that his mother, Monica, was of Berber origin, on the basis of her name, but as his family were *honestiores*, an upper class of citizens known as honorable men, Augustine's first language is likely to have been Latin. At the age of 11, he was sent to school at Madaurus (now M'Daourouch), a small Numidian city about 19 miles south of Thagaste. There he became familiar with Latin literature, as well as pagan beliefs and practices. Augustine went to Carthage to continue his education in rhetoric. Although raised as a Christian, Augustine left the church to follow the Manichaean religion, much to the despair of his mother, Monica. As a youth, Augustine lived a hedonistic lifestyle for a time, associating with young men who boasted of their sexual exploits with women and urged the inexperienced boys, like Augustine, to seek out experiences or to make up stories about experiences in order to gain acceptance and avoid ridicule.

St Augustine as a Gift to the Church

For Nathan (2003), Augustine's influence on the Christian church and on Western society in general is well recognized by scholars and theologians. Augustine was one of the first Christian ancient Latin authors with very clear vision. His writings cover wide areas of human and social life. He touched anthropology, eschatology, ecclesiology, creation astrology, and Mariology, among others. Bray (2015) speaking about St. Augustine maintains that the first thing noticed about him is the emphasis he placed on the relationship of the individual to God. Notwithstanding the fact that he lived in a world that was rapidly becoming Christian, at least in a formal and public sense; yet he admitted that he became a Christian only when the Holy Spirit of God moved in his heart, and not before. This shows how he valued the importance of relationship with God which is the bedrock of church.

Augustine's Contributions to the Church

Confessions

Confessions gave birth to a whole new genre of literature in Western culture—the autobiography. The work chronicles Augustine's intellectual, moral, and spiritual pilgrimage from paganism to Christianity. The title "*Confessions*" can be understood in a triple sense: Augustine's candid and contrite confession of sin, his sincere confession of newfound faith, and his thankful confession of the greatness of God.

The content of the *Confessions* may provide the most penetrating spiritual and psychological self-analysis of any work ever written. Suffused with truly profound theological, philosophical, and apologetic insights, Augustine quoted and expounded the scriptures throughout. He devoted the latter part of the work to an exegetical analysis of the early chapters of Genesis (the created world being the cosmic setting for the soul's journey to God). Written in the form of a prayer to God (similar to the Psalms), the work also serves as thought-provoking devotional literature.

While the *Confessions* records Augustine's extraordinary life and spiritual pilgrimage, the book may really be about the human soul's search for God. In reading the *Confessions*, people often feel they are reading about their own search for God. *Confessions* certainly stand as one of the greatest Christian books ever written.

The City of God

Nash (1999) maintains that:

This is written over a 13-year period, *The City of God* (the title is taken from Psalm 87:3) stands as Augustine's *magnum opus*. It is his longest (about 1500 pages) and most comprehensive work, and is considered by some to be his most significant contribution to Western thought. In this book, Augustine laid new foundations in the fields of Christian apologetics and in the analysis of Christian history. (p 163 – 164)

The City of God can be divided into two major parts. The first part of the work consists of Augustine's refutation of the charge made by some Roman citizens that Christianity was responsible for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. For Augustine, the pagan's claim that the sack of Rome by barbarians in 410 was one of the consequences of the abolition of pagan worship by Christian emperors was to the contrary; rather that Christianity saved the city from complete destruction and that Rome's fall was the result of internal [moral](#) decay. In the same, at present time the moral decadence of the society is greatly alarming that lessons should be learnt from history. For instance, the campaign in support of homosexuals and lesbians can reduce the birth rate in future that will derail the world if unchecked. More so, society that allows moral decadence cannot survive.

In the second part, Augustine developed his own tale of two cities: "the City of God" and "the City of Man." The City of God, represented as "Jerusalem," has a divine origin and a heavenly, or eternal, destiny. The City of Man, represented as "Babylon," has a human origin and an earthly, or temporal, destiny. Augustine saw human affairs, like all things, as being under the control of the sovereign and providential plan of Almighty God. In this work, Augustine gave the Western world its first philosophy of history, presenting and defending a distinctly Christian linear view of history.

On the Trinity

This work contains the first fully systematic theological presentation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Augustine explained and defended orthodox Trinitarianism, asserting that the one true God exists eternally and simultaneously as three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He vigorously rejected all forms of subordinationism that would treat the Son or the Holy Spirit as inferior in nature to the Father. He defended the Western church's position that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father "and the Son." The use of the phrase "and the Son" (*filioque*) in the Western version of the Nicene Creed later gave rise to the *filioque* controversy that sharply divided the Eastern and Western churches. Commenting on this McGrath (1998) opines that:

A unique feature in Augustine's approach to the Trinity is his use of "psychological analogies." He argued that since the Triune God created the world, one would reasonably expect to find "traces of the Trinity" in creation. And since human beings were made in the expressed image of the Triune God (*Imago Dei*), traces of the Trinity are likely to be found in human beings. Augustine believed the human mind (composed of "intellect, memory, and will") reflected this three-in-one concept. Augustine believed that this Trinity doctrine was derived from, and fully supported by, sacred Scripture. (p. 67).

Augustyn (n.d) opines that The City of God was one of the most influential works of the middle ages. St. Augustine's famous theory that people need government because they are sinful served as a model for church-state relations in medieval times. He also influenced the work of Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin and many other theologians throughout the centuries.

Theologian of Grace

The theological traditions of Roman Catholicism and historic Protestantism both claim Augustine as one of their own. On one hand, his theological views concerning the nature of the church and the sacraments (arising from the Donatist controversy) significantly influenced the development of Roman Catholic theology. On the other hand, his theological views concerning the nature of original sin, the absolute necessity of grace in salvation, and predestination (arising from the Pelagian controversy) influenced how Protestants formulated their doctrinal views. In effect, Augustine's theological views substantively influenced how Western Christendom formulated many of its central doctrines. Those doctrines, within the context of systematic theology, include: anthropology (doctrine of man), hamartiology (doctrine of sin), soteriology (doctrine of salvation), ecclesiology (doctrine of the church), and eschatology (doctrine of the last

things). The following two doctrinal controversies illustrate Augustine's significant theological influence.

The Donatist Controversy

In the early part of the fourth century, the Christian church suffered severe persecution at the hands of the Roman emperor Diocletian (A.D. 284-313). During the persecution, certain Christian leaders bowed to the pressure and surrendered their copies of Scripture (possession of which was declared illegal) to the Roman authorities. After the persecution died down, some of those leaders who had given in to Rome's demands nevertheless rejoined the church. The Donatists (named from Bishop Donatus, and centered in North Africa) argued that these *traditores* ("those who handed over," traitors) should be excluded from the church, for the church was made up only of the "pure." The Donatists further argued that apostate (lapsed from the faith) clergymen cannot properly and validly administer the church's sacraments. The Donatists subsequently divided from the Catholic Church and formed their own "pure church."

The Donatist controversy for McGrath (1998) was very important for it raised questions concerning the true nature of the church and the validity of its sacramental system. Augustine opposed the Donatists, arguing that the Christian church throughout its existence would remain a "mixed body" of both saints and sinners. He believed that the lapsed clergymen could be restored to the church through repentance. Further, he argued that the validity and the efficacy of the sacraments does not depend upon the human agent who administers them, but rather upon the One who instituted the sacraments, namely Jesus Christ. For Augustine, the personal unworthiness of a minister could not compromise the validity of the sacraments. Augustine's views became normative in the church concerning these issues. As Brown (1967) puts it thus:

Augustine of Hippo campaigned against Donatism as bishop; through his efforts, orthodoxy gained the upper hand. According to Augustine and the church, the validity of sacraments was a property of the priesthood independent of individual character. Influenced by the Old Testament, he believed in discipline as a means of education (p. 65).

The Pelagian Controversy

In the early part of the fifth century, an intense theological controversy broke out over the nature of human sin and the necessity of divine grace in salvation. Pelagius (AD. 360 - 420), a British lay monk, in attempting to bring about moral reform in the church began teaching that human nature was not corrupted by Adam's fall (a denial of original sin) and that salvation was an earned reward. For Pelagius, human nature had no natural or

inherent inclination toward evil that must inevitably result in sin; thus, human beings need not sin. He believed that sin resulted merely from improper education, bad examples, and bad habits.

Augustine viewed Pelagianism as a dangerous heresy of self-help salvation. He argued vigorously that Adam's fallen nature (including both guilt and corruption) had indeed been transmitted to his progeny. Fallen humanity, left to its own devices, could never enter into a relationship with God. He even referred to fallen humanity as *massa damnationis*, "a mass of damnation." However, God has intervened in mankind's desperate dilemma through the life, death, and resurrection of the God-man, Jesus Christ. For Augustine, salvation is a gift of God's grace from first to last. What human beings cannot do for themselves because of sin, God has accomplished through the grace of Christ. Historical theologian McGrath (1998:36) comments:

Augustine held 'grace' to be the unmerited or undeserved gift of God, by which God voluntarily breaks the hold of sin upon humanity. Redemption is possible only as a divine gift. It is not something which we can achieve ourselves, but is something which has to be done for us. Augustine thus emphasizes that the resources of salvation are located outside of humanity, in God himself. It is God who initiates the process of salvation, not men or women (p. 54)

Ultimately, Pelagius and Augustine had two fundamentally different views of Christianity. McGrath succinctly summarizes the Pelagian - Augustinian debate:

The ethos of Pelagianism could be summed up as 'salvation by merit,' whereas Augustine taught 'salvation by grace.' It will be obvious that these two different theologies involve very different understandings of human nature. For Augustine, human nature is weak, fallen, and powerless; for Pelagius, it is autonomous and self-sufficient. For Augustine, humanity must depend upon God for salvation; for Pelagius, God merely indicated what has to be done if salvation is to be attained, and then leaves men and women to meet those conditions unaided. For Augustine, salvation is an unmerited gift; for Pelagius, salvation is a justly earned reward (p.34)

Augustine's view that Christianity is a religion of divine rescue finally overcame Pelagius's self-help religion. In the year AD 431, at the Council of Ephesus, Pelagianism was condemned as a heresy. Augustine's teaching about salvation by grace, in which he was deeply influenced by the Apostle Paul's epistles, would significantly influence the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century. Augustine later became known as the *doctor gratiae* ("doctor of grace").

Controversial Understanding of Predestination

The Pelagian controversy also focused Augustine's thinking concerning the doctrine of predestination. In his early writings, Augustine taught that God merely chose those human beings whom He foreknew would freely choose to believe in Him (thus predestination is based upon God's foreknowledge). However, Augustine took the position that God chooses to extend His saving grace to some (the elect), but not to all (by passing the reprobate). Thus God predestines some to eternal life via (irresistible but not coercive) grace, but leaves others in their sin to be justly condemned (thus predestination is based upon God's autonomous and inscrutable choice). Augustine's "great and terrible" doctrine of so-called double predestination (though the reprobates are damned through their own choice and deeds) was rejected by many in his time and still is by many today. However, Augustine believed that while God's act of election may be inequitable ("Jacob I loved but Esau I hated" (Romans 9:13), His election is not unjust. For Augustine reasoned that sinners have no claim whatsoever to the grace of God. The choice as to whom God extends His grace is totally within God's sovereign discretion and prerogative. Most importantly, Augustine believed his thinking on the subject was merely reflecting the clear teaching of Scripture, especially the writings of the Apostle Paul (Romans 8-9; Ephesians 1).

Augustine's strong predestinarian views influenced a number of Roman Catholic thinkers in history, but has been for the most part set aside or rejected by modern day Roman Catholicism. Augustine's basic views on this topic were embraced in large part by such Protestant Reformers as Martin Luther and John Calvin, and are still reflected today in the historic confessional statements of the Reformed theological tradition. In the same vein, Brown (1990) observes that while Augustine had no formal education in philosophy, he was nevertheless an intuitive philosopher with varied interests. His use of philosophy in the service of his study of theology left a deep and abiding influence on Western philosophical thought.

The Necessity of the Church

Next on the list comes his adherence to the church. Augustine knew that although every Christian must have a personal faith that is not dependent on outward rites and traditions, he also belongs to the universal church. Christians cannot leave the church and live on their own, as if nobody else is good enough for them. There may be good reasons for establishing new congregations, but believers ought to be in fellowship with others and not cut themselves off as if nobody else is quite as good or as pure as they are.

Monroe (2018) accepted the fact that in the West we learned from St. Augustine to despise schism, or at least we should have. If we sufficiently understand it in its ecclesiological and Christological import, we should take it for what it is: the rending of Christ's body. We have Augustine to thank for this stark diagnosis, just as we have him to thank for a remedial understanding of the Church's unity, grounded as it is in Christ's action in the sacraments.

Appraisal

Looking at the influence of St. Augustine to the church how has present African Church leaders helped to reshape the story of the church in the midst of her numerous challenges? It is obvious that numerous African Church leaders have stood out to make laudable marks that have shaped the church. For instance, the Most Rev Peter Akinola played a significant role towards the rejection of same-sex marriage as unscriptural and the formation of the conservative Anglicans towards the undiluted belief in the scripture as the bed rock of Anglican heritage. As Berkford (2008) puts it that one of the most powerful figures in Anglicanism, the Primate of Nigeria, has vowed to rescue the worldwide church from its crisis over sexuality. His influence is quite amazing that in 2006 Akinola appeared on TIME magazine's list of the world's 100 most influential people in the category of Leaders and Revolutionaries. In the same vein, in 2007, the Nigerian newspaper ThisDay gave him together with 17 others a Lifetime Achievement Award, stating in its citation: "Called a bigot by some in the Anglican Church, his attitudes nonetheless represent a deep-rooted conservative tradition in African Christianity that is flourishing and growing." But he has been criticized by other sections of the international press, including the right-leaning *Daily Telegraph* which in an editorial on 23 March 2007 characterized him as one of the "extremists" who had "hijacked" conservative Anglicanism, and as "a deeply divisive figure" who has "defended new Nigerian legislation that makes "cancerous" (his word) same-sex activity punishable by up to five years' imprisonment.

Even many African Church leaders like Bishop Kukah, Cardinal Arinze and many others have been on the front burner in shaping the story of the church in modern times. Notwithstanding all these, more still needs to be done in the areas of formation of doctrines and principles that will ensure that the church did not go into extinction in the midst of the liberal movement of the West.

Conclusion

St. Augustine, apart from Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul, is arguably the most influential figure in the history of Christianity. However, when will African leaders learn from history? The time is now for the Africans to take their place in the midst of global church. For this to happen, Africans need to employ a systematic approach to cater for his numerous talents in order to minimize the influence of the West over the continent? As Nathan (2003) observed that though Augustine was African, yet he wanted more in life than Africa could provide, so at about the age of 30 he moved to Rome, the center of his universe.

Notwithstanding, *The Oxford History of Western Philosophy* summarizes Augustine's tremendous influence on Western intellectual history as follows:

It is arguable that Augustine is the most influential philosopher who ever lived. His authority has been felt much more broadly, and for a much longer time, than Aristotle's, whose role in the Middle Ages was comparatively minor until rather late. As for Plato, for a long time much of his influence was felt mainly through the writings of Augustine. For more than a millennium after his death, Augustine was an authority who simply had to be accommodated. He shaped medieval thought as no one else did. Moreover, his influence did not end in the Middle Ages. Throughout the Reformation, appeals to Augustine's authority were common place on all sides. His theory of illumination lives on in Malebranche and in Descartes's "light of nature." His approach to the problem of evil and to human free will is still widely held today. His force was and is still felt not just in philosophy but also in theology, popular religion, and political thought (p. 3).

In essence, the church in African will continue to be the hope of the global church in times of crises and especially in this end time but for this to continue, the African church leaders must take strategic and systematic steps in equipping the numerous talents in Africa for the great task ahead. For this to happen, the church in African must shun greed, corruption, nepotism and adhere strictly to authentic scriptural principles.

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