

RESENSIES/REVIEWS

Serge Lancel

ST. AUGUSTINE

Translated from the French by Antonia Nevill. London, SCM Press, 2002. xviii+590 pp. ISBN 0 334 02866 3. £25.

Which church leader, after the apostles, has had the greatest influence on the course of church history? Several candidates could be nominated for that honour, but my vote would go to Augustine, the bishop of Hippo. His influence dominated the Middle Ages, especially in the West. His anti-Pelagian writings were a major inspiration for the Protestant Reformers of the 16th century. The theology of all the magisterial Reformers of the 16th century can be quite simply described as “Augustinian”. Their Roman Catholic opponents made skilful use of Augustine’s anti-Donatist writings, so that the theological debates of the 16th century could be described as “Augustine versus Augustine”. Augustinianism has continued to play an influential role in Catholic and Protestant circles since the 16th century (e.g., the Jansenists, the Puritans, the Thomists, Jonathan Edwards). For this reason a new biography of Augustine is to be welcomed and for the serious reader it provides a wealth of insight into the great bishop’s life and thought.

The author, Serge Lancel of the University of Grenoble, is an acknowledged master of the ancient history of north Africa and has written major books on Carthage and Hannibal. This present biography of Augustine, translated from the French, is addressed to the common educated reader and is furnished with numerous erudite notes to inform the inquisitive where the evidence for his statements can be found. Lancel has been able to exploit the considerable number of new Augustinian documents discovered during the past 25 years, the new letters found by the Austrian scholar Johannes Divjak in two French libraries and the twenty-six new sermons found by François Dolbeau in Mainz city library.

Shortly after his celebrated conversion, Augustine was press-ganged into the church’s ministry at Hippo. This put paid to his desire for a contemplative life and made sure that he became more than an obscure footnote reference to an interesting early 5th century Christian neo-Platonist. The hurly burly of regular church life — preaching, teaching, combating heresies, strengthening the faithful and disciplining the wayward —

weaned him off his earlier neo-Platonist philosophical leanings and moved him to engage more deeply with the biblical themes of sin, grace, salvation and the nurture of Christian piety.

From the beginning, Augustine wrote extensively, enabling us to observe in some detail the progress and development of his thought. The structure of Lancel's book is more or less chronological and is guided, to a large extent, by the writings of Augustine. The bishop's literary output was extraordinary and he must have spent an immense amount of time, day and night, writing — or rather dictating to his hard working secretaries. Augustine's writings (and so also his life, after his conversion) can be divided into five or six major categories:

- (1) *Anti-Manichaeae writings*. For about nine years prior to his conversion, Augustine had been an adherent of the disciples of Mani, a dualistic Gnostic sect. In public debate Augustine argued against Fortunatus, a leading Manichaeae priest, who eventually admitted he was beaten, if not convinced.
- (2) *Confessions*. His autobiographical *Confessions*, written in the form of a prayer to God, are probably the most famous and popular of all Augustine's writings. They describe his spiritual journey from darkness to light, from sin to grace.
- (3) *Anti-Donatist writings*. In Augustine's time the church in Africa was almost evenly split between the Catholics and the Donatists, the latter accusing the former of compromising with apostates. The Donatists claimed to be the only true and pure Christian church on earth. Lancel's account of the great conference at Carthage in 411 at which representatives of both sides came together in an impassioned debate is almost exciting.
- (4) *Anti-Pelagian writings*. Pelagius, a British monk, took exception to Augustine's teaching on human sinfulness as undermining the need and duty of Christian obedience and holiness. Over against Pelagius's emphasis on human ability by divine creation, Augustine stressed human inability apart from divine grace. This became a prolonged controversy, continued later with Julian of Eclanum, which led into the intricate and complex issues of freedom and grace, predestination and election, and putting Hippo's bishop "on the frontier of heresy" (Lancel). Lancel's handling of this aspect of Augustine's thought is masterly and gives insight into one of the most complex areas of Christian theology.
- (5) *The Trinity*. In between dealing with more controversial issues and other urgent ecclesiastical matters, Augustine spent most of his life on

Resensies/Reviews

this great exposition of the central Christian revelation and mystery, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

- (6) *The City of God*. Originally begun as a Christian defence against pagan accusations that Christians were responsible for the fall of Rome by neglecting the ancient gods, this became Augustine's exposition of a Christian and biblical view of history. It is a tale of two cities: Jerusalem (the city of God, whose inhabitants know and love God) and Babylon (the city of man, whose inhabitants love themselves). These two cities and their citizens are mingled in this world and can never be simply identified with any particular state, culture or institution. They will be finally separated only in the last judgement.

The author of this book has also engaged in archaeological diggings in Roman Carthage, and if there is one criticism we can make it is that sometimes the archaeologist comes to the fore in overloading the text with an immense amount of detailed information. Sometimes the mass of detail detracts from the general flow of the book and threatens to drown a good story in a welter of minutiae. This reviewer would have preferred more direct quotations from the bishop of Hippo and fewer details surrounding his life and times. Having said this, the publication of this biography is to be welcomed indeed as a reminder of one of the truly great theological minds in Christian history. And in this impoverished age of widespread theological superficiality, what can we say but "Tolle, lege" (take up and read).

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