

BOOK REVIEWS

Gerald BONNER, *Freedom and necessity: st. Augustine's teaching on divine power and human freedom* (Washington: Catholic university of America, 2007), 142 p. (ISBN: 978-0-8132-1474-0)

In a prefatory note, Gerald Bonner outlines the various aims of his new publication: to set out Augustine's final understanding of divine predestination, in which he claims that free choice still exists in fallen human beings; secondly, to highlight the harshness of the consequences of his doctrine of Original Sin; thirdly, to draw attention to a more positive side of Augustine's theology, namely his notion of participation and deification. Less clear in the prefatory note (and in the title) of his work is that Pelagianism will also play a central role in this study. The author will not only render a more balanced view of this alternative theology, with its strong emphasis on human free will, but he tries also to find out the reasons why Augustine reacted with sustained violence and bitterness against their position.

Covering a varied range of topics within the confines of a book of merely 142 pages is a remarkable tour de force, something which only an erudite Augustine scholar such as Gerald Bonner is able to accomplish. The following items are only some of the subjects dealt within this study: the notion of God's omnipotence, the role of Christ, the meaning of baptism, Original sin and its consequences, the concept of participation and deification, and the creation from nothing. Augustine's intellectual illumination around 395/6 receives particular attention, since it became a defining moment for his final view on human free choice, whereby he came to acknowledge that God's grace was stronger than freedom of choice. Gerald Bonner also assesses the way in which Augustine attempted to remedy the problem of responsibility in his gloomy view on fallen man, who is only free to do evil, and, more generally, what led Augustine to come to his theology of predestination, in which only a small minority will be saved by God's freely given grace, and the majority will suffer eternal punishment, without being able to escape this harsh fate. Importantly, the author draws attention to the fact that some of the more grim tenets of Augustine's theology enjoyed broad acceptance among Christians at the time, who saw Origen's universalism condemned by the Church. Gerald Bonner wonders why Augustine, endowed with such a sensitive and wide-ranging mind, did not attempt to rise above them.

The author's lucid literary style, with its meticulous choice of wording, makes this book a pleasure to read and a storehouse of

quotable phrases. He amply demonstrates his familiarity with various writings of Augustine (his anti-Pelagian writings, epistles, sermons, early dialogues, and, of course, his masterpieces (*Confessiones*, *De civitate Dei*, *De Trinitate*)), which greatly contributes to the richness of the work.

This fine study not only provides a refreshing, balanced view of Pelagianism, it does the same for Augustine, by putting his harsh theology of predestination next to his more optimistic conceptions of participation and deification. Brought out particularly well is the import of Augustine's belief in creation from nothing (inspired by (Neo-)Platonism), which provided a rational argument for his claim that man is utterly dependent on God, so that any form of independence would lead to self-annihilation. At the same time, Augustine's adoption of the pagan philosophical concept of divine providence, assures him that an omnipotent God does not play with his creation as an irrational tyrant, but that he, as a reasonable being, governs his creation to the tiniest detail within a supernatural just order. On the other hand, there exists in the human soul an inherent, natural yearning for God, its Creator. Gerald Bonner arrives at a crucial question: does the fallen human soul retain some initiative in this aspiration towards God? Augustine's final answer, from 395/6 onwards, will be negative. This natural yearning, which is also reflected in man's desire to be happy, is hopelessly misdirected in fallen man. This makes him seek happiness in created things rather than in the Creator, the source of all happiness. Any reorientation of this natural yearning in man towards God, will have been prompted by God Himself: the initiative towards man's salvation lies therefore entirely in God's hands. Within Augustine's system there is a problem of responsibility: we cannot but sin without God's saving grace, but we cannot be held responsible for something which we have no power to avoid. Pelagius can (easily) defend God's justice in condemning sinners and unbelievers, by arguing that they were responsible for the choices they made in life. This is a view akin to our modern thinking, Gerald Bonner states. Augustine found a solution in Adam's fall: his theory of the seminal identity of the human race, makes that humanity shares moral responsibility for this fall. In making the conditions of salvation more demanding by insisting that only baptized people can be saved (the only exception are martyrs), Augustine is ready to accept all the harsh consequences of his system. He gives the example of the death of twin babies, of which only one of them has received baptism, due to circumstances which obviously are beyond their control. The one baby will be saved, the other will be eternally damned. This is one of the grimmest consequences of August-

tine's theology. Where many would start questioning the system, and see the advantages of the Pelagian system, Augustine nevertheless relentlessly stuck to his view. His system rested on two main requirements: it had to be rational, and nothing in it should give even the slightest opening for human pride, the root of all sin.

To present an intricate and wide-ranging subject matter in a comprehensive manner, a clear overall structure and a tight line of reasoning is mandatory. In these, Gerald Bonner has not been entirely successful. If one were to read only the conclusion, one would have the impression that Gerald Bonner wanted to present his assessment of the Augustinian and Pelagian position concerning free will, whereby the pros and cons of both systems would be summed up, and where an attempt was made to understand Augustine's harsh attitude towards a position which had something to recommend itself. The title and the prefatory note of the book however do not point towards such a content.

Various repetitions in the book make the overall line of reasoning rather confusing.¹ The use of cross-referencing would have made the study as a whole more transparent and more closely knit together. Although the indices at the end of the book can help to find where a particular topic has been discussed elsewhere, it would have been useful for the reader if reference was made, even if only in a footnote, to an earlier treatment of the matter in the book. Perhaps the most arresting example of this shortcoming is Bonner's use of *Letter 166*. It is quoted on p. 74, and again on p. 109, where it is cited for making a similar point, namely to show that Augustine himself was disturbed by some of the harsher aspects of his theology. Only an attentive reader would realize that both quotations come from the same letter. More striking is the fact that on p. 109, Gerald Bonner cast doubt on the sincerity of Augustine in this letter ('If we are to take seriously his letter for Jerome'). Such a qualification has not been made in the first reference to *Letter 166*. Also in other instances sources are being used as if for the first time, while, actually, this is not the case. An explanation for this seeming sloppiness can be found in the introduction, in

¹ For instance, the literal repetition of 'These two paradoxical aspects of Augustine's thought will be the theme of our following chapters' (on p. 29 and again on p. 33); the line of reasoning on participation in chapter 1, (p. 30-31), returns in chapter 3 (p. 52-53). Although Gerald Bonner writes on p. 30 he will return to the subject later, much on p. 52-53 seems repetition which could have been avoided. For instance, on p. 30 he refers to question 46, 2 of *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta-tribus*, and in a footnote he quotes the Latin text of the whole section. On page 52, he refers again to this section and then gives a full English translation of the text.

which Gerald Bonner writes: 'This book grew out of a course of four lectures which I was due to give at the University of Malta in 2001'. Possibly the author lacked the time to fully integrate these four separate lectures into one consistent whole, to make the line of reasoning more tight, and the overall structure more apparent, and to remove unnecessary repetitions, since they only have their use in a series of oral lectures. Because so many diverse topics are being discussed in a rather disjointed line of reasoning, it is difficult to summarize the work. Further, there are some smaller errors which almost inevitably creep into any study: Augustine's conversion moment is not described in book IX of *Confessiones* (p. 58), but in book VIII; likewise, the discussion of the (Neo-)Platonists is not to be found in book VIII (p. 104), but in book VII.

There is further the treatment of the issue concerning the compatibility of divine omniscience and free will on pages 39-41, with the question: '*Does his foreknowledge constrain us to act as He foresees?*'. Gerald Bonner refers to the lengthy discussion of this problem in *Confessiones* book XI, in which Augustine argues that, because God is outside time, past, present, and future exist as an eternal present. Therefore, there is technically no foreknowledge at all, only knowledge. Equally – if not more – important is Augustine's argument in book V of *De civitate dei*. Augustine replies here to Cicero's criticism of the compatibility of God's foreknowledge and man's free will. His solution to maintain both is the claim that our wills themselves play an important part in the order of causes, which is, for God, fixed, and contained in his foreknowledge (V.9). The fact that God knows what we freely will (since he knows all the causes which make us will it and act upon it), does not mean that God constrains our will. Confusing is Gerald Bonner's statement in this section concerning this problem that one can very easily find quotations in Augustine's work which declare both God's *omnipotence* and human freedom of choice, seeing that the term omniscience is something quite different than 'omniscience' or 'prescience'. Gerald Bonner criticises that Christian predestinarians are 'not consistent in applying their principles to everyday life' (p. 39), because in pastoral practice most of them act as if the individual has free will. Yet, Augustine's explanation in his letter to Firmus shows that this does not necessarily have to be inconsistent. Augustine only asks to treat everybody as he or she is, namely a potential elect; everybody can be in the possession of free will, and have the power to choose and do good at any given moment in time, because we cannot know to whom and when God is giving his grace. Within the context of freedom and necessity, the existence of a causational

universal fixed order to which Augustine seems to subscribe is an important feature.

In his revaluation of the Pelagian position, Gerald Bonner posits that the acknowledgement of human free will, and therefore of individual responsibility for our actions is something which we would be sympathetic to. However, even in our time the existence of free will is being questioned. We may have stopped believing in the existence of God, but we have therefore not abandoned the idea of universal determinism and of a (linear) causal order, to which Augustine also seems to have subscribed. These tenets are in themselves sufficient to question the existence of free will. Particularly the modern idea that we are a product of nature (our genes) and nurture (experience), can lead to a denial of free will.² Also the modern term *diminished responsibility* used in court, seems to undercut the Pelagian idea that we are responsible for the choices we make. The discovery that the MAOA gene is a factor in a person's aggressive behaviour in combination with the existence of childhood maltreatment, threatens the idea of individual responsibility. How far can a person with an inherited malfunctioning MAOA gene (nature/genes) and with a history of childhood maltreatment (nurture/experience) be held responsible for his aggressive and asocial behaviour later in life?³

Two factors should perhaps have deserved more attention in Gerald Bonner's study. The first one is astrology, whose influence on Augustine has often been underestimated. We should not forget that Augustine was an adherent to astrology longer than to Manicheism.⁴ One of the claims of astrology is that the wills of human beings are controlled by the stars, or else, if the stars are understood as only signs, our wills are nevertheless controlled by the will of God, who also holds sway over the stars.⁵ This is echoed in Augustine's system, in which God exerts control over the will of man, only, unlike astrology, we cannot know what God has in store for us. Furthermore, the difference between the Biblical twins Jacob and Esau helped Augustine realize just how profoundly God has control over our lives. Augustine's own example of two babies, the one baptized and saved, the other not baptized and therefore doomed, was no doubt inspired by the twin

² See the book on popular science of Matt Ridley, *Nature via nurture: genes, experience and what makes us human* (London: Harper, 2004).

³ Matt Ridley 2004, p. 267-269.

⁴ Leo Charles Ferrari, 'Augustine and astrology', *Laval théologique et philosophique* 33 (1977), 241-251.

⁵ AUGUSTINE, *De civitate Dei* v.1.

argument used by the opponents of astrology. The problem of astrology (different 'fates' of twins), was solved within Augustine's system by God freely giving saving grace to the one but withholding it to the other. Gerald Bonner mentions that Julian accused Augustine of having remained a Manichee, but Augustine has also been accused of reintroducing astral fate with his conception of grace and predestination. This accusation should not come as a surprise, since Augustine at times identifies the Biblical *sors* with grace, whereby he has to warn his readers not to think of astral fate.⁶

A second factor, which is only scantily referred to by Gerald Bonner, concerns the contribution of psychology in our attempt to understand Augustine's grim attitude towards Pelagians and how he came to believe in his harsh system. When for instance Gerald Bonner states that 'Augustine could not bear not to win' (p. 101), he could have referred to Augustine's acknowledgement in *Confessiones* that as a child he loved to win in competitive games.⁷

When Gerald Bonner points out that the Pelagian saw man as *emancipatus a Deo*, he could have contrasted this, as Peter Brown did in his study, with Augustine 'likening his relation to God to that of a baby to its mother's breast, utterly dependent'.⁸ Also when Gerald Bonner rightly refers to the aristocratic character of Pelagianism, he could have reflected on Augustine's negative attitude towards pagan (aristocratic) 'ideology', visible not only in *De civitate Dei*, but also in the first philosophical dialogues. We should not forget that in his former life Augustine had been pushed to become a member of the aristocracy, and that in his youth he was expected to take on board its ideology. Peter Brown brings out very well the aristocratic, traditional way of thinking behind Pelagian's theology,⁹ so that it is perhaps no wonder that Augustine was very much opposed to it. This is in line with Augustine's strong hostility towards pride, praise and glory. The basic principle of traditional ideology was the link between one's own

⁶ AUGUSTINE, *Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 118.4: 'in sorte autem quid, nisi Dei gratia commendata est?' Augustine's journey from astrology to divine grace has been thoroughly examined by Bernard Bruning in his comprehensive article, 'De l'astrologie à la grâce', *Augustiniana* 41 (1991), 575-643..

⁷ AUGUSTINE, *Confessiones* I. x (16).

⁸ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: a biography*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 352.

⁹ Peter Brown 2000, p. 369: 'No matter how self-consciously Christian the Pelagian movement had been, it rested firmly on a bed rock of the old ethical ideals of paganism, especially on Stoicism. Its moral exhortations had appealed to a classical sense of the resources and autonomy of the human mind'.

merit (*virtus*) and reward (praise, honour). Already in his first writings we can see Augustine opposing this traditional ideology, when he posits in the introductions of *De beata vita* and *De academicis*, that one's *virtus* is not strong enough to reach the happy life, and that the help of *Fortuna* is required. This help from *Fortuna* can be understood as God's freely given grace. Augustine's long-standing aversion for the traditional, aristocratic ideology may therefore have contributed to his hostile reaction against Pelagianism.

Despite this criticism of lack of overall structure and occasional sloppiness, there is no doubt that the positive aspects of this study greatly outweigh these minor points. Each chapter of this concise publication contains such a wealth of insights and enough food for thought to make it worth reading it again and again.

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Johannes BRACHTENDORF, *Augustine's Confessiones*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005, 315 p. ISBN: 3-534-15423-1

Augustine's *Confessiones* is a classic of world literature in which many a person has buried himself willingly or unwillingly. The many available commentaries which help the reader to penetrate into the deeper layers of the work are, if only from a historical viewpoint, certainly not superfluous. The assistance Brachtendorf offers with his study purports to be more than historical. The author masterfully paints the philosophical background of Antiquity, from which the inquisitive Augustine profusely drew to embellish his new ideas. But even this is not sufficient for Brachtendorf: each time he wants to show the mark Augustine left on his legacy of the past. This backward projection he also carries through within the work of Augustine itself, in which he already was engaged in an in-depth exploration of the subject. When it emerges that Augustine has developed the matter further at a riper age, Brachtendorf also makes a projection in the future. This so to speak forward projection goes further than Augustine, since Brachtendorf witnesses the same subject reemerge centuries later, demonstrating how much this Church Father has become the hinge for many a theme in the history of ideas of Western thought. Later philosophers such as Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein are being dealt with where required. Also here the author shows the indebtedness of these people towards Augustine, and he points out where they are at variance with him.