

My Approach to St. Augustine

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Wednesday, March 22, 2023

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This posting is going to be a little bit about St. Augustine, but more about how I approached learning about this influential man. Given that there are whole college courses devoted to St. Augustine and to the books of St. Augustine, anything I could add would be pure folly. But fool I did play ... just a little.

Who was St. Augustine? He is also known as the [Bishop of Hippo](#) and lived from 354 to 430. When the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410, many in the Roman Empire blamed the sacking and weakness of Rome on the Christians, and this, in part, was the impetus for his most famous book, *The City of God*. In total he wrote 48 books, many that are still studied by scholars and a few by lay persons.

Why I became interested in St. Augustine. While not a religious person, religion fascinates me. One could make the argument that the history of humanity, in many ways is the history of religion. Religion also fascinates me as the types of religion are only limited by the human imagination. As I have studied religion, and specifically when studying Western Christianity, and Western philosophy, the name of St. Augustine kept cropping up. He has been called the most important post-biblical Christian theologian in the West. One lecturer called him the most important influence on Christianity after the Apostle Paul. Stephen Greenblatt in a New Yorker article, [How St. Augustine Invented Sex](#), stated that “...*there has probably been no more important Western thinker in the past fifteen hundred years.*”

As alluded to, my religious studies are more from curiosity than any religious conviction. I have been doing so, sporadically, for about 20 years now. My muse frequently takes me down different paths and different subjects, but religion and philosophy have been reasonably constant. Before that I was more wrapped up in life and work than what I facetiously call my “cerebral” pursuits.

My Approach

As referred to elsewhere, I did not see me reading *The City of God*, 1000 pages of what I can only imagine to be rather dense theological slogging. The audio book is some 40 hours, about the same length as *Moby Dick*. A novel of this length is one thing, but a book of theology would be a little much. Then I stumbled on the [Wondrium](#) course: [Books That Matter: The City of God](#) taught by a University of Virginia professor, [Charles Mathewes](#) who has a Ph.D. in Theology. I found it utterly engrossing, and

gave it five stars in my review on Wondrium which you can see at the end of the posting.

I did listen to [Confessions](#) or [The Confessions](#), title varies with translation, as an audio book. It was very approachable in that format, and I did not find it to be a slog. However, I also watched a course on Wondrium: [St. Augustine's Confessions](#). This was taught, tag team style, by two professors from the [State University of New York, Genesco](#), [William R Cook](#) and [Ronald B. Herzman](#). I also included that review at the end of this posting.

For me this worked very well, and gave me a sense of who St. Augustine was, what he espoused, and why he is important to the modern world.

While we have the Wondrium streaming service, the individual courses are available on DVD from [Great Courses](#). Of course, unless you caught it on sale, the price of the DVD for *The City of God* is the price of a year's worth of streaming from Wondrium, who bought Great Courses a while back.

My Five Cent Thoughts on the Subject

The usual knock on St. Augustine is that he is a misogynist, and he was the original proponent of the [just war theory](#). However, in his two books that I now have a "passing" knowledge of this did not come up, or, at least, the professors did not touch on it. Also, while not original with St. Augustine, he was a big proponent of Original Sin, that is babies are born sinners and are destined for hell without Christian intervention. Ouch. Another knock I encountered, and that I explained somewhat clumsily in [Saint Augustine and Anti-Semitism](#), is that the root of the current anti-Semitism could be laid at St. Augustine's feet, at least according to one scholar, University of Virginia professor, Charles Mathewes.

My Nickel Comments on *Confessions*

My two personal knocks from this brief study are different. I have been saying for decades that Christianity would have been a kinder, gentler, more inclusive religion if the Apostle Paul had had a satisfactory sex life. I am still going to say that, but now I have come to believe that I must include St. Augustine in that equation. In his autobiography of the first part of his life, *The Confessions*, he talked about his "lust" like it was an out of control demon ruling his life. As I read it, it sounded very much like a normal, healthy sex life. He may have sown a few wild oats as a teenager, but his adult relationships were of long duration and monogamous, even if outside of wedlock, not uncommon in that culture and time. After his conversion to Christianity, he became celibate. From my point of view, celibacy is not a healthy situation unless you are truly an asexual person. In his writings he followed the lead of the Apostle Paul that it was better to be celibate, but if you could not then marriage was the best option. Another source described the language that St. Augustine used in *The Confessions* to describe his sexual impulses as negative, reflecting images of disease, disorder, and corruption. As Bishop he taught that sexual intercourse is only legitimate for the purpose of having children. Ouch again. The thought experiment of what Christianity might have been, if it had not been so hung up with sex as sinful and only for procreation, is boggling.

My other knock is what he called sinful. He spent a lot of territory explaining why the time, as a teenager, he and a group of friends stole pears off a neighbor's tree, was so sinful. While he barely touches on in *The Confessions*, at the urging of his Christian mother, he sent off the woman he had been

living with for a long while, and with whom he had a son. The reason given in sources outside of *The Confessions* is that his mother was a social climber and wanted him to make a “good” marriage. In my world view, sending this mother of his child off for this reason is gravely sinful, but apparently not enough so for him to dwell on it like the stealing of the pears.

My Nickel Comments on *The City of God*

The book is divided up different ways depending on the translation. Basically the first half of the book deals with St. Augustine’s rebuttal as to Christians being responsible for the degeneration of Rome and the Roman Empire. The second half gets into theological concerns. The title of the book stems from his comparing the most powerful city on earth in his time, Rome, to the “city” of God.

As I listened to Professor Mathewes expound on this book, I had the feeling that he was discussing a work of science fiction. Much of St. Augustine’s more esoteric theology is based on the concept of God being outside of time and outside of space – outside the space-time continuum as we might say today.

In my Southern Baptist tradition they tend to talk of heaven as this perfect paradise. Everyone lives in palaces, the streets are paved in gold, the weather is San Diego perfect. There are no health concerns, everyone is cured of diseases and disabilities, everyone is happy. Sounds fun for a millennium or three, but longer than that sounds like it would be soul crushingly boring. I could see me praying to be reincarnated (definitely not part of my tradition) as anything, a worm, a wombat, a beggar in Mumbai, anything other than having to face one more millennium of perfect.

However, if heaven was outside of time, anyone in heaven would not have a sense of the overpowering ennui from century after century of striding the same perfect, golden streets.

He uses this concept of God outside the space-time continuum to do an end run around the age’s old question of “if God created the universe, who created God?” Since God is outside of time, he sees all time simultaneously. That is the past, present and future are all available to God, and are the same. This has been used to argue why there is predestination, and also why there is not predestination.

There is much, much more in *The City of God*, but this being outside of time and space was a bit of a paradigm shift in my thinking about the possibilities of what God is.

I decided somewhere about three quarters through the course that St. Augustine and [L. Ron Hubbard](#) must be drinking buddies in this alternate reality and frequent patrons of Milliways, the restaurant at the end of the universe.

I intentionally kept this brief and only touched on a few things that gave me pause for thought. And truly if you have read this far, I am very impressed... and surprised. While I was a bit tongue-in-cheek by spells, IMHO, if you want to understand Western thought and Christianity, you need at least a rudimentary understanding of St. Augustine. And that my friends is my five cents worth.

My Wondrium Reviews

Books That Matter: The City of God

5 out of 5 stars.

Great Prof for a difficult subject

I was a little amazed while scanning some of the reviews of this course that at least one of the reviewers complained of Dr. Mathewes use of “big words” and his mannerism. “The City of God” is a complicated, dense theological work. It was never going to be an easy subject to approach. It was always going to take some work. My vocabulary is better than most folks, and yeah the presenter did use a few “big words” that I had to look up. If I only read books or took courses where I knew all the words, I do not believe I would be expanding my intellectual horizons. Sometimes you have to work for it. And as to mannerisms, Dr. Mathewes does have a smile that comes across as a bit smirky, but I decided a little ways into the course he just did not know how to smile well and thus ignored it.

I took the course because as I explore religion and western philosophies, the name of St. Augustine continually pops up. I do not see me reading the rather dense, 1000 page book so I saw this as a great alternative. And it was. I definitely have a better feel for St. Augustine and his importance to Christianity and Western thought.

Lesson 18 really grabbed my attention – probably because my wife is Jewish – as the presenter laid much of the current anti-Semitism at St. Augustine’s feet. I found that very surprising. His reasoning is a little involved and more than I need to get into in a review, but basically it has to do with the Jews of his time rejecting Christ as Savior and the concept of Christian Supersessionism.

I found this an extremely interesting and worthwhile course. And yeah it takes a little work to get through it, but ain’t that why we are here.

St. Augustine’s Confessions

4 out of 5 stars.

Good course on an important religious figure

This is the second course I have watched with this tag-teaming dynamic duo. I was initially put off by the tag teaming when I watched their course on Dante’s Divine Comedy, but it works amazing well.

While not religious, I am interested in religion as it is such a significant part of the human experience. If you study Christianity, you encounter St. Augustine. If you study western philosophy, you encounter St. Augustine. It is said he has had an outsized influence on western thought. For those reasons, I wanted to learn about him. I do not see me reading St. Augustine’s 1000 page opus, “The City of God”, but I did watch the Wondrium class (by a different presenter) that was extremely interesting. I listened to “The Confessions” of St. Augustine as an audio book. I found it reasonably accessible, but wanted a deeper dive so I watched this course. This course fit that bill.

A very interesting course about an important figure in Christianity, I found it interesting and worth my time.

And so it goes.

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