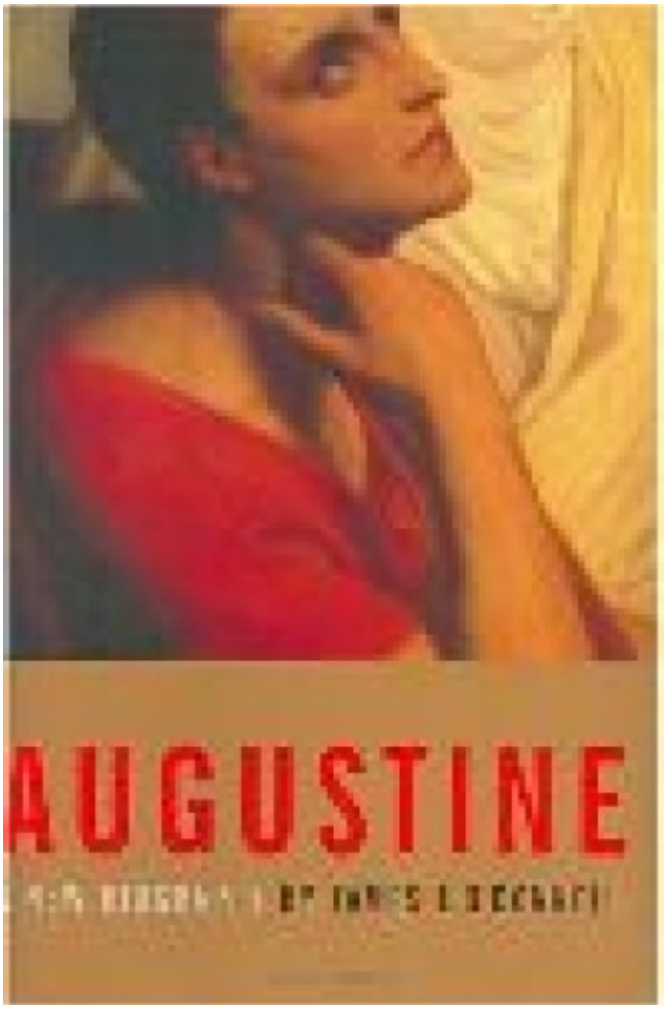
Augustine on the couch

by Lewis Ayres in the February 7, 2006 issue

In Review



Augustine: A New Biography

James O'Donnell
Ecco

For Catholics and Protestants alike, Augustine’s views of grace and freedom have set the theological agenda. His trinitarian theology, his account of evil and his views on the relationship between the church and secular government also continue to be the

subject of fierce debate. Because of Augustine's undoubted importance in Western Christianity, the supposed ills of that tradition are often foisted on him.

In the face of this attitude, most teachers try to show that Augustine's views are considerably more complex than are popularly supposed. They also try to show that Augustine's complexity is grasped only when he is lowered a little from his pedestal and seen among his peers in historical context. For example, his understanding of the ascetic life must be considered as his attempt to achieve a balance between a variety of options in late fourth-century Italy. His views of women—to take another complex issue—include both the insistence that women are made in the image of God by virtue of their humanity (and will be equal to men after the resurrection) and the assumption, unquestioned in his day, that women's basic function is to bear children and that this activity is intrinsically inferior to male activity. With a thinker such as Augustine, simplistic judgments will always hide from us the complexity of his texts.

James O'Donnell aims to offer a new reading of Augustine by uncovering Augustine's own attempts to create an image of himself. For O'Donnell, Augustine was a nervous, self-obsessed character who, in the *Confessions* and in his own commentary on his literary corpus, attempted to shape his reception by future generations. Some of O'Donnell's account builds on good recent scholarship and helps us look past the towering and authoritative theological figure who emerged from the medieval and Reformation eras.

But his approach also has its problems. O'Donnell relies on an old tool of the modern biographer—psychological projection. His hermeneutic for Augustine's theology is to assume that fear (especially fear of uncertainty), resentment and sublimated desire are at the heart of every major theological conflict. With some postmodern twists, his approach is pretty much that pioneered by Erik Erikson in *Young Man Luther* (1958).

O'Donnell is interested in how Augustine's early life, education and career shaped a man who later found himself following a very different path. How did this extremely intelligent up-and-coming rhetorician (on the run from a provincial background) adapt to the life of a North African bishop? To what extent was he trying to be what he might have been? Did he ever really embrace the humility of which he so often spoke? As he answers these questions O'Donnell is the consummate talk-show host, probing his guest for the psychological tidbit that will reveal just a little more about

the person behind the public figure.

Unfortunately, the first casualties of such a psychological hermeneutic are Augustine's own writings. O'Donnell quotes a fair amount from Augustine's letters but very rarely from any of the major theological treatises (and rarely from the many longer letters that are mini-treatises in themselves). Augustine's style of argument is largely hidden in this book.

The second consequence of O'Donnell's approach is that a number of his most striking conclusions are largely psychological suppositions based on little evidence. Perhaps the most glaring example is his account of Augustine's conversion from Manichaeism to Catholic Christianity. In the *Confessions*, Augustine describes this move as prompted by his encounter with Platonism and then by the preaching of Ambrose, bishop of Milan. O'Donnell, however, sees it differently: "Manichaeism was with him early and late, and was the one truly impassioned religious experience of his life. He was the sort of person who has a great love affair when young, sees that it just won't work, breaks it off, then settles down in a far more sober and sensible marriage."

Is there any evidence for this? In fact, there is considerable evidence to the contrary. Manichaeism was every bit as ascetic as fourth-century Christianity. And it was as a Manichee that Augustine lived with his common-law wife; only Augustine the Catholic had the strength (and "passion"?) to opt for celibacy. For Augustine, the incarnate God alone could ignite his love and intellect; Manichaeism, by comparison, was loveless and dull. O'Donnell does not offer us any evidence for his assertions, nor does he account for the counterevidence. Of course, all biography involves to some extent the construction of an argument about a character's inner life (or lives). But the argument must be built on degrees of plausibility, based on evidence.

O'Donnell's way of writing about Augustine's theology is even more problematic. In summarizing Augustine's conflict with Pelagius over whether the human will could heed God's law without the aid of divine grace, O'Donnell begins by swiftly dismissing the idea that the conflict was rooted in a doctrinal dispute over the meaning of Paul's letters. He considers three alternative explanations. First, resentment: Augustine perhaps resented the younger man's success in offering a vision of Christianity that Augustine had abandoned in his earlier years. O'Donnell thinks this account won't do: something deeper must have been at stake.

A second explanation, O'Donnell tells us, is that Augustine and Pelagius present two different visions of Christianity. On the one side is Augustine, with his pessimism and irrationality. Augustine combines "Nicene Christology," with its irrational and mysterious irruption of the divine into the world, and a dark view of the necessity of grace. On the other side is Pelagius, who represents "something more irenic, rationalist, and open than the Christianities that eventually emerged." For O'Donnell this gets to the heart of the dispute. But it doesn't explain why Augustine won.

So, bringing in a third factor, O'Donnell explains Augustine's theological victory by pointing to the rise of the canonical scriptures as a source of authority. Once the various documents that make up the scriptures were read together, they were read in ways that changed their significance: Paul the Jew writing to Jews became Paul the Christian writing against Jews. Once this happened, O'Donnell suggests, Augustine's triumph was inevitable and Pelagius was stuck.

O'Donnell seems to presuppose that all attempts to argue for the plausibility of belief in the incarnate God as defined by the Council of Nicea necessarily fail—though he examines none of them, not even Augustine's. And he apparently believes that the pre-Augustinian commentators on Paul, who take a very different tack (most of the Orthodox tradition, for example), are just mistaken about what the text must necessarily be taken to mean. It is at least a little ironic that O'Donnell says the dispute with Pelagius could not have been about the interpretation of Paul and then ends up "revealing" that it was precisely because Paul became central that Augustine had to win. O'Donnell clearly knows Augustine's texts well; he just declines at important points even to try to take their arguments seriously.

So what would I recommend to someone seeking an introduction to Augustine? Peter Brown's *Augustine of Hippo* is still the seminal work. It is largely a portrait of Augustine without the theology, but it is still a wonderful read and does much to place Augustine in his immediate background. Serge Lancel's monumental *St. Augustine* is better at providing details of Augustine's life and context, and it does not do a bad job of introducing his theology. It is, however, not well translated from French and is wordy at best. Lancel is also always clear that his subject is *St.* Augustine: he takes insufficient notice of recent work attempting to explore Augustine's status in his own time.

To my seminary students I recommend Carol Harrison's *Augustine*: *Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity*. This shorter introduction to Augustine's thought and

context is clear, elegant and reliable. To explore the controversies that still rage, sample *Augustine and His Critics*, edited by Robert Dodaro and George Lawless, and *Augustine Through the Ages*: *An Encyclopedia*, edited by Alan Fitgerald.

In the end, one should read Augustine himself. Begin by reading his *Confessions*, but do not stop with the conversion in the Milanese garden. The remaining books of *Confessions* offer a wonderful summary of Augustine's theology. Book Thirteen's allegorical reading of the Genesis narrative as foreshadowing the church is a marvelous introduction to many of Augustine's most cherished and personal themes. Read some of his sermons and letters in the fine new translations published by New City Press. And do not forget to sample his homilies on John and on 1 John, rendered into excellent English by John W. Rettig in the Fathers of the Church series. Time spent here will not be wasted.