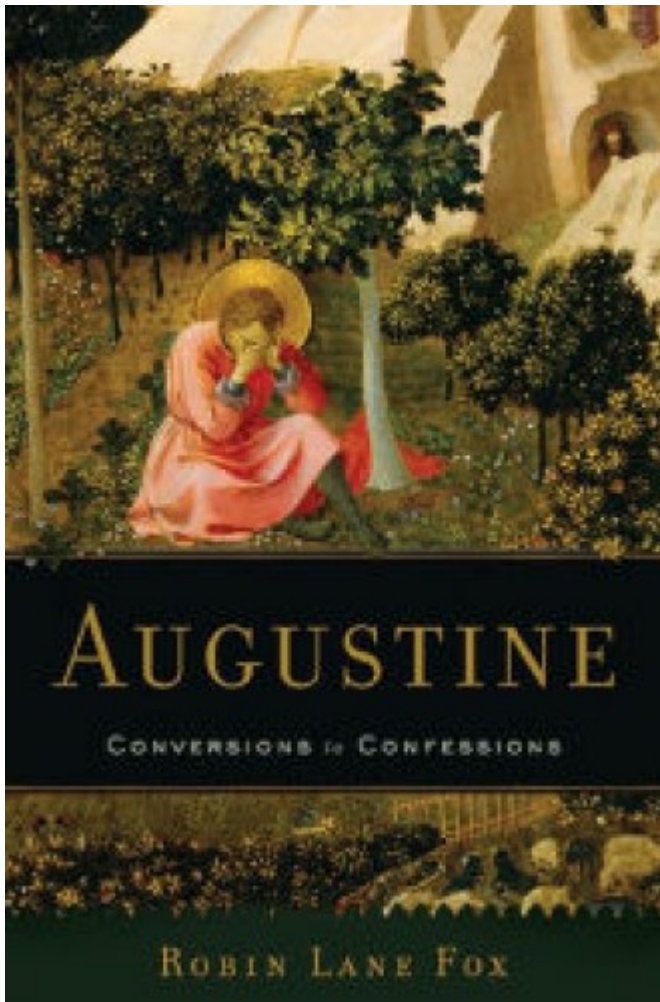


The mysteries of young Augustine

by [Margaret R. Miles](#) in the [June 8, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Augustine

By Robin Lane Fox

Basic Books

The reader may wonder, as I did, how over 600 pages could be written about the young Augustine—his life to about CE 397, when he finished writing his *Confessions*. The answer lies in Robin Lane Fox's detailed comparisons of Augustine's experience,

as related in his *Confessions* and other early writings, to that of two of his contemporaries, Libanius of Antioch and Synesius of Cyrene. Lane Fox draws on their similarities and differences to deftly illuminate Augustine's own experience.

Recently discovered letters and sermons by Augustine also allow Lane Fox to shed new light on Augustine's circumstances. He reconstructs not only Augustine's thoughts and words, but also exchanges with Libanius, Synesius, and other men, whether written or face-to-face. The result is a highly informative portrayal of the nature of theological conversation in late antiquity. Lane Fox is neither a philosopher nor a theologian; he is a historian seeking to understand Augustine on location.

Augustine addressed his *Confessions* to his fellow celibate "slaves of God," an audience that could be counted on to mourn with him over his sins and to rejoice at his progress. But he was very aware that a larger audience would overhear his confessions, and he feared their laughter. However, he did not fear their interpretations of scripture. He tolerated or even invited them, allowing that multiple interpretations could all be consonant with Christian faith.

Just as Lane Fox is interested in Augustine's conversations, he is himself in conversation with other Augustine scholars throughout the book. His polite disagreements with them do not intrude on his narrative; they are not the reason Augustine is a big book. Most of his comments on others' views occur in footnotes and in the bibliographical comments that precede the notes for each chapter. Thus he manages to be both a scholar's scholar and accessible to nonspecialists.

Moreover, far from employing the time-honored academic strategy of building his own position by dismantling established interpretations, Lane Fox acknowledges the probability of multiple interpretations, usually introducing his own interpretations of particular questions with "in my view" or "I believe." I prefer the more accurate "I think," preserving "I believe" for articles of faith; however, Lane Fox's scholarly humility, perhaps learned from Augustine, is praiseworthy.

Lane Fox's strong definition of *conversion* specifies "a decisive change whereby we abandon a previous practice or belief and adopt a new one, . . . a turning which implies a consciousness that the old way was wrong and the new one is right." By this definition Lane Fox determines that within the basic framework of Christianity—which Augustine had imbibed with his mother's milk—the young Augustine experienced conversions to philosophy, to celibacy, and to the "true

Christianity” preached by Mani. He also converted away from rhetoric, worldly ambition, and sex. In Lane Fox’s view, he had no further conversions.

Subsequent refinement of his most notorious doctrines, such as original sin and predestination, were developed in response to questions posed to him by parishioners, colleagues, and opponents. Lane Fox identifies the beginnings of more fully fleshed-out doctrines in Augustine’s fourth-century writings without yielding to the temptation to discuss their later forms.

A leitmotif of *Augustine* is what Lane Fox identifies as Augustine’s habit of “creative,” “constructive,” or “fertile” misunderstanding. Augustine frequently misread or misquoted scripture, usually to accommodate and support his sense of living a “guided life.” For example, valuing order very highly, he misquoted Romans 13:1 as “All order is from God” (the accurate quotation is “All authority is from God”).

Even Augustine’s famous conversion in the garden was prompted by a “creative misunderstanding.” According to Lane Fox, the words Augustine heard in the midst of his emotional crisis, “*Tolle lege*,” likely mean “pick up; gather,” referring to the fruit that lay on the ground around him as he sat in a garden under a fig tree. “Augustine mistook ‘*tolle lege*,’ . . . and gave it the wrong meaning,” namely, “take and read.” Lane Fox observes: “If God works indeed in human lives, He works through human error.” In short, Augustine’s hermeneutical question was not what does the text say, but what does the text say to me in this moment.

A vexed question demanding to be addressed by Augustine’s interpreters is that of his early sexual behavior. In a troublesome passage of *Confessions*, Augustine confides that he “muddied the clear spring of friendship (*amicitia*) with the dirt of physical desire (*concupiscentia*) and clouded over its brightness with the dark hell of lust (*libido*).” Lane Fox struggles with the passage and concludes that because Augustine does not specify lust for a male, he must have “had sex with a lover, surely a female.”

I disagree; Augustine the rhetor used words with intent and precision. He never spoke of friendship with a woman. His relationship with his mother might be considered an exception, although he did not use the word *friendship* in reference to it. Rather, he regarded her as an honorary male, praising her “masculine faith” in “woman’s clothing.” As a young monk he refused to see his sister, a vowed celibate

in an adjoining convent. Nor did he acknowledge an element of friendship in his 15-year relationship with his concubine. Friendship, in Augustine's confessed experience, was completely a male category.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault has cautioned historians to be wary of projecting onto historical figures a 20th-century preoccupation with sexual orientation, urging that instead we think—as historical people did before our present terminology was available—of “bodies and pleasures.” Frustrating modern reviewers' efforts to assign him an orientation, Augustine speaks of his youthful sexual adventures simply as “bodies and pleasures”: “It was a sweet thing to me both to love and to be loved, and more sweet still when I was able to enjoy the body of my lover.” Certainly his settled long-term choice was celibacy, preceded by a 15-year heterosexual relationship. Prior to that, it was “bodies and pleasures.” Because he does not get more specific, we must let it go at that.

Though we would like to know more about the young Augustine, Lane Fox acknowledges that Augustine did not write his *Confessions* for the purpose of providing readers with a full autobiography. In fact, *Confessions* is not primarily about Augustine at all; it is about God's activity in the particularity of Augustine's life. Retrospection revealed to Augustine the myriad large and small turns by which God led him to recognize that his life was unerringly guided to truth. Augustine's body was often the instrument by which he learned. From the terrible pain of toothache, to his failed voice on which he was utterly dependent as a rhetor, to the severe discomfort in what Lane Fox calls his backside—again and again physical pain was Augustine's tutor. The young Augustine's intellect was also fed by books “‘procured’ on his behalf by God.”

In sum, Lane Fox vividly demonstrates that Augustine's experience, so often “creatively misunderstood,” nevertheless brought him to the ability to claim, “My weight is my love; by it I am carried wherever I am carried.” With all its energy and passion, his psychic “weight” was “carried over” from lust to love. This was God's tremendous achievement in Augustine's life.