

Augustine's African heritage

Catherine Conybeare's new biography reveals a bishop formed by two worlds, two languages, and a church struggling to define itself.

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In Review



Augustine the African

By Catherine Conybeare
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Generations of historians have represented Augustine of Hippo as the single most important figure in Christianity's transition from antiquity to the medieval world. He is usually seen as an intransigent defender of classical values against the inevitable erosion caused by the spread of Christianity to multiple locations and populations. Yet Augustine was not Roman, nor was Latin his native tongue. He was born and raised in North Africa; Punic was the language of his childhood. Catherine Conybeare presents Augustine as a passionate and complex man who, rather than suppressing his loyalty to either Latin- or Punic-speaking churches, remained loyal both to the Roman church that baptized and ordained him and to his African identity.

Conybeare reveals an Augustine who was a Latin-speaking classicist with strong affinities with the Punic-speaking African churches. Yet, as an adult, his Punic was "pointillist and superficial." In fact, historians' knowledge of Augustine's world is complicated by the fact that all of the relevant written sources are in Latin; Punic left no written voice. Conybeare has worked with classic texts for many years, and her peerless Latin allows her translations to achieve not only accuracy but also delicate shades of feeling-infused meaning. *Augustine the African* is an excellent book; it is both scholarly and engaging to the nonspecialist reader.

The differences between the two North African churches of Augustine's era—which Conybeare calls "the church in Africa" (Latin-speaking) and "the African church" (Punic-speaking)—were largely geographical and institutional. Doctrinally, the churches believed alike: "Both adhered to orthodox trinitarian doctrine. Both said the Nicene Creed. Both accepted the primacy of the bible—Hebrew and Christian scriptures together—as spiritual authority and guide." Yet the Punic-speaking African church was considered "schismatic, a group that had splintered off from the main church, but not heretical." The only "fundamental difference" between the churches concerned the efficacy of baptism. Augustine's church—the church in Africa—believed that the baptismal rite itself conferred sanctity, while the African church believed that sanctity was conferred by the legitimacy (read: African identity) of the person doing the baptizing. "One side looked to Rome for its legitimacy; the other insisted on its pure African lineage and inheritance."

This difference escalated into a series of polemical arguments which came to be known as the Donatist controversy. Conybeare demonstrates several ways in which Augustine's "fiery over-involvement in the fight against Donatism" reflected and shaped his relationship to his African identity. The controversy was resolved at the Council of Carthage (AD 411), when "the weight of imperial power" prevailed and the African church was declared heretical. As Conybeare explains, "Donatism was now illegal. The distinctive African church was forced to incorporate with its loathed counterpart."

As a young man, Augustine experienced a tenacious inner struggle between his sexual desire and his longing for celibacy, for he had decided "that becoming truly Christian meant giving up sex." He later recalled an occasion of vivid insatiable urgency and dramatized it in his midlife autobiography, *Confessions*. This famous passage describes bevvies of his female friends clutching and caressing him, whispering teasingly in his ear. This incident sparked Augustine's "conversion" to celibacy. (His full conversion occurred when he realized that he must seek God within himself rather than seeking gratification in objects outside himself.)

Conybeare says little about Augustine's commitment to celibacy, perhaps because this wild drama has captured the avid attention of numerous readers who are interested in little else about Augustine's life and work. Certainly Augustine was attracted by examples of celibate Christians he had read of or heard about, but given the excitement over the management of sex in his environment, it remains curious that the married Christians who surrounded him did not encourage him to consider the integration of sex and sanctity a possible subjective imperative. Augustine's mother, Monnica, a married woman who was scrupulously obedient to her husband in all things, might well have been a model for Augustine of Christians who apparently managed to integrate sex and sanctity. Indeed, Augustine cited her "time and again as an example of how to be a good Christian," notes Conybeare. Moreover, he wrote in *Confessions* about the "delight and sweetness" (his description of the feeling

of spiritual rapture) he experienced in conversation with Monnica on several occasions. His own integration of his Roman and African identities might also have provided an example of integrating apparently conflicting loyalties rather than jettisoning one and embracing the other. But he did not choose to integrate sex and sanctity, and this had long-term implications for the practice of Christian spirituality.

Conybeare paints a skillfully nuanced picture of the “constantly renegotiated” Christianity in North Africa in Augustine’s era. His lifetime saw the decline of Roman cities and pagan culture in North Africa, increasing taxation, and the growth of a class of wealthy landowners. In 430 CE, as Augustine lay dying, wealthy North Africa was invaded by boat from Hispania by the Vandals, who held Hippo under siege. They would continue to move east, capturing Carthage in 439 CE and conquering Rome in 455 CE. They would rule parts of North Africa and the Mediterranean for nearly a century, until 534 CE. Amid this chaos, Conybeare concludes, Augustine “died as he had lived, both an African and a Roman.”