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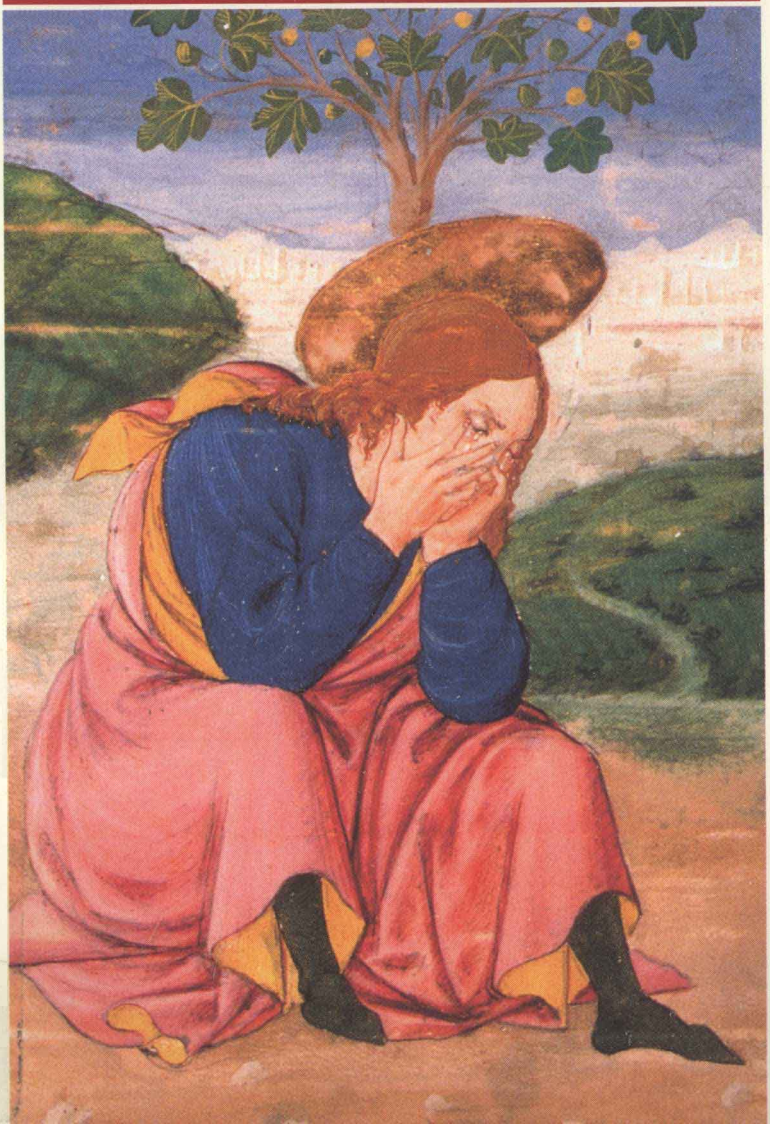
SAINT AUGUSTINE
CONFESSIONS

A new translation by Henry Chadwick



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Confessions

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
HENRY CHADWICK

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CONFESSIONS

AUGUSTINE was born in 354, the son of a Christian mother and a pagan father who farmed a few acres at Thagaste (now Souk-Ahras in eastern Algeria). Education at the hands of poor teachers could not hinder his acute mind from acquiring a mastery of classical Latin literature, especially Cicero and Virgil whose writings he knew almost by heart. He became a gifted teacher of literature and public speaking successively at Carthage, Rome, and Milan. At Carthage he met a woman by whom he had a son, and with whom he lived faithfully for fifteen years until at Milan she became a fatal block in the path of his secular career. A personal crisis followed. Already in Africa his religious quest took him to Manichee theosophy, then in Italy to scepticism and thence to the Neoplatonic mysticism of Plotinus. In July 386 in a Milan garden he resolved to abandon a secular career and the respectable marriage that would make this possible. Baptized by St Ambrose (387), he buried his widowed mother at Ostia and returned to North Africa (388). Against his will he was forced into ordination in 391 and five years later became bishop at Hippo (modern Annaba) for the remaining thirty-four years of his life. A fluent and voluminous writer on theology, philosophy, and sex, his writings made him influential and controversial both in his lifetime and in the subsequent history of Christendom. He died during the Vandal siege of his city (28 August 430).

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Introduction

AUGUSTINE'S *Confessions* will always rank among the greater masterpieces of western literature. Like Rousseau's book with the same title (but otherwise having little in common), the work has a perennial power to speak, even though written virtually sixteen centuries ago and certainly a book rooted in antiquity. The contemporary reader today may find much of it so 'modern' that at times it is a shock to discover how very ancient are the presuppositions and the particular context in which the author wrote. Because of this context and these presuppositions, a translation needs to be provided with some minimum of concise explanation if the reader is to grasp the point of Augustine's argument or the social context of his time (the work is a major source for social history as well as for religion). For this work is far from being a simple autobiography of a sensitive man, in youth captivated by aesthetic beauty and enthralled by the quest for a sexual fulfilment, but then dramatically converted to Christian faith through a grim period of distress and frustration, finally becoming a bishop known for holding pessimistic opinions about human nature and society. The *Confessions* is more than a narrative of conversion. It is a work of rare sophistication and intricacy, in which even the apparently simple autobiographical narrative often carries harmonics of deeper meaning. To understand the work one needs to comprehend a little about the author's mind, his loves and hates, his intellectual debts and principal targets for criticism. The *Confessions* is a polemical work, at least as much a self-vindication as an admission of mistakes. The very title carries a conscious double meaning, of confession as praise as well as of confession as acknowledgement of faults. And its form is extraordinary—a prose-poem addressed to God, intended to be overheard by anxious and critical fellow-Christians.

The emotional power and in places the rare beauty of the writing have not invariably captured readers. In ancient as in more recent times some have been unattracted by the sophistication of the style or by the conception and estimate of human capacity presupposed by the work. The earliest of surviving British writers, Pelagius (whose British origin is attested by Augustine himself), was seriously

alarmed by the strong language about the nothingness of humanity and the totality of human dependence on God for the achievement of the good life. Pelagius feared the morally enervating effects of telling people to do nothing and to rely entirely on divine grace to impart the will to love the right and the good. Another contemporary critic wrote to Augustine to complain of the clever rhetoric; he felt that so brilliantly acute a mind could equally skilfully defend the opposite opinion with an equal éclat; like a high-powered lawyer, he would have been equally content whether prosecuting or defending. The elaborate manner of late Latin oratory, with its love of antitheses even if they were artificial (as some of Augustine's were), was a style that contemporaries admired but were accustomed to associate with insincerity. Augustine himself records that when he had to deliver a panegyric for the tenth anniversary of the accession of the emperor Valentinian II, he was not only filled with absurd nervousness about his public performance (some of which may have been due to Italian mockery of his African accent), but ashamed of the lies and bogus flattery that, as everyone knew, filled his discourse. He wrote for an age stamped with an elegant scepticism, for which a well-turned phrase gave more pleasure than a cogent argument for the truth. In several places in the *Confessions* and elsewhere Augustine's term for contemporary pagan culture was 'loquacity': it used fine words, even rococo elaboration, but had little or nothing to say. Nevertheless, Augustine's wish to distance himself from the secularity of contemporary oratory and the teaching of pagan literature never meant for him that, in setting forth the truth he had come to find in Christian faith, he felt bound to avoid the skills he had learnt in the rhetorical schools. He loved to use rhymes in his prose, and delighted in polished epigrammatic antitheses as much as any pagan writer. Only in his case the epigram almost always carries a sharp point directed to a religious target of extreme seriousness for him. His prose is more effective with short epigrams than with long periods. The presence of so much rhyming in the Latin diction presents an insoluble problem to the translator. It is impossible to reproduce in another language without resulting in absurdity.

Augustine shows an awareness that he will have Christian readers suspicious of his elaborate rhetorical style; at V. vi (10) their fears are expressly mentioned. These suspicious persons are no doubt identical with the puritan critics who felt that immediately upon his

conversion he ought to have resigned his professorship of grammar and literature instead of waiting until the vacation to hand in his letter of formal resignation (IX. ii (4)). He felt bound to concede that his profession of 'selling words' in the 'bazaar of loquacity' was vulnerable to moral criticism. At the same time he expressed remarkable doubts and hesitations whether skill in public speaking can be acquired from a teacher (VIII. vi (13)). He was conscious that his own high ability in this respect was a natural endowment, a gift of God, not something he had learnt from any of the second-rate teachers whose instruction he had endured in youth.

The work was written at a considerable distance in time from the conversion at Milan, which lay in the past by thirteen or more years. The immediate stimulus to the writing seems to have come from the convergence of two factors. The first was an unfortunate and embarrassing row which had broken at the time when Augustine was made a bishop in 396. For a time after his return to North Africa from Italy in the late summer of 388 he had organized a lay community of his friends at Thagaste, quasi-monastic in character. But in 391 he had gone to Hippo Regius on the coast, and on attending the Church service on the Sunday morning he had been spotted by the old bishop, Valerius, a Greek-speaker from southern Italy. In his sermon the bishop pointed out his need for a presbyter, and suggested that Augustine would do well. It was far from uncommon at this period for ordination to be forced upon the candidate by the coercion of the congregation. Augustine was allowed no escape, and had to submit.

Four or five years later bishop Valerius was anxious to ensure that no other Church took Augustine away to be their bishop elsewhere, and persuaded the presiding bishop of Numidia (in North Africa, presidency went not with the see, except in the case of Carthage, but with seniority by date of consecration) that Augustine be ordained as assistant or coadjutor bishop with the right to succeed. Such an ordination was not in line with canon law, but that does not appear to have caused the difficulty. Augustine was clever, and therefore distrusted. Many recalled how combative he had once been against the Catholic Church before his conversion. Were the monasteries that he was attempting to found heretical nests of Manichee dualism? His lurid youth had not been forgotten. And then he had been baptized far away at Milan: were there

reliable witnesses to attest to that? It was normal custom for a foreigner to be received to baptism only after good testimony to him had been received from his home land. It did not appear that Ambrose at Milan had asked for letters from Africa in support of this candidate.

The elderly presiding bishop wrote an irate letter to Valerius enumerating the complaints against Augustine. The letter was not kept confidential, and was exploited by unfriendly critics. The criticism was the more painful because of an inveterate schism, the Donatist schism in the African Churches since two rival bishops were ordained at Carthage in 311 in the aftermath of the Great Persecution. In Numidia the Donatists were in a majority in both town and countryside, and notably in Hippo itself. The Donatists got hold of the presiding bishop's letter and used it as a rod to beat Augustine.

Accordingly, the *Confessions* took some of its impetus from a wish to answer critics both inside and outside the Catholic community. The exploitation of the case against Augustine by the Donatists helps to explain the fact, at first sight surprising, that the work makes not even the most oblique reference to the existence of Donatists, though every day of Augustine's life as a bishop was certainly beset by problems arising out of the schism with all its rancour and periodic violence. No reader of the work would ever guess that Augustine was now presiding over a minority community in Hippo, under the necessity of fighting for its life against a militant majority.

The second stimulus to the composition of the work came from outside Africa. In the summer of 395 Augustine's friend Alypius, by then bishop of Thagaste, had written out of the blue to a notable convert to the ascetic life in Italy, Paulinus, a multi-millionaire aristocrat from Bordeaux (where he was a pupil of Ausonius); he owned land in Campania and became governor of that province. He suffered various family tragedies, was ordained priest in Barcelona, and finally settled at Nola in Campania as priest, later becoming bishop. He sold large parts of the estates belonging to himself and his wife, and his renunciation of the world and its gold caused a sensation. Alypius may have hoped to interest him in supporting ascetic foundations in his diocese. He sent him anti-Manichee works by Augustine. Paulinus' reply asked Alypius to send him an

autobiography revealing how he had come to adopt the ascetic life, and by what way he had come to baptism and ordination. Alypius' answer does not survive. He shared the request with Augustine. The *Confessions* is not dedicated to Paulinus of Nola, but it can hardly be accidental that a substantial part of book VI consists of the biography of Alypius.

At the end of his life Augustine wrote a review and reappraisal of his output, the *Retractationes* (almost half of which consists in telling critics that he has nothing to withdraw so that one cannot translate the title 'Retractions'). When he came to the *Confessions* he observes that they serve to excite the human mind and affection towards God; the act of writing the book had done that for himself at the time, and 'that is the effect when it is read now'. Aware that not everyone has admired the work, he nevertheless adds 'However, they have given great pleasure to many brethren and still do so'.

The work was written during the last three years of the fourth century AD by a man in his mid-forties, recently made a bishop, needing to come to terms with a past in which numerous enemies and critics showed an unhealthy interest. Aurelius Augustinus had been born on 13 November 354 to parents of modest means, who owned a few acres of farmland at the small town of Thagaste, then in the Roman province of Numidia, now Souk-Ahras in the hills of eastern Algeria about 45 miles inland from the coast. His father Patrick was not a Christian until baptized on his deathbed in 372, but his mother Monica[1] was a devout believer coming from a Christian family. Her ambitions for her gifted son were divided between high and well-grounded hopes for his secular success and a yearning that, despite his wanderings from her own faith and moral standards, one day she would see him an orthodox Christian. He pained her at the age of 17 by taking to his bed a Carthage girl of low social standing, with whom he lived faithfully for fifteen years until his ambition for high office under the imperial government made her a disastrously unsuitable partner.

Aged 18 he was moved by his reading of a philosophical dialogue by Cicero, *Hortensius*, teaching that happiness is not found in

[1] Her name, spelt by Augustine Monnica, is probably Berber, and perhaps both parents were ethnically Berber. Their culture was Latin. Monnica had near relatives who were Donatists.

physical pleasures of luxurious food, drink, and sex, but in a dedication of the mind to the discovery of truth. Cicero's remarks on the way in which the majority of mankind look for happiness in the wrong place initially led him to pick up his Latin Bible. Its style, especially in the Old Testament, was often close to translationese, painful to an admirer of Cicero and Virgil. Before Jerome's revision of the Latin Bible, produced during the years from 383 to 405, the Old Latin Bible composed by second-century missionaries in Italy and Africa was colloquial and at times obscure to the point of being barbaric. Augustine found that once he had put it down, it was hard to pick it up again. Moreover, he was offended by the polygamy of Old Testament patriarchs and the different genealogies of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

He was drawn to the theosophy of Mani, a Mesopotamian gnostic of the third century whose religion was zealously propagated by underground missionary work, despite fierce prohibitions from the imperial government. The religion of Mani's followers, called in Latin *Manichaei*, Manichees, expressed disgust at the physical world and especially at the human reproductive system. Procreation imprisoned divine souls in matter, which is inherently hostile to goodness and light. Manichees had a vegetarian diet, and forbade wine. There were two classes, Elect who were strictly obliged to be celibate, and Hearers allowed wives or concubines as long as they avoided procreating children, whether by contraceptives or by confining intercourse to the 'safe' period of the monthly cycle. Hearers prepared the correct food for the Elect. Manichee propaganda was combative against the orthodox Catholic Church, which granted married Christians to be in good standing, and admitted to the lectionary the Old Testament stories of Moses the murderer, David the adulterer, Joseph the state monopolist. Baptism and eucharist were held in contempt by Mani on the ground that Catholics ascribed to these sacraments a holiness which Manichees discerned in everything. Mani strongly denied the historical reality of the crucifixion of Jesus; for him the Cross was a symbol of the suffering of humanity. However, Manichees accepted the epistles of St Paul, appealing especially to Romans 7 to underpin their dualism of spirit and matter, light and darkness. Admittedly, they thought the New Testament writings had been interpolated.

Central to Manichee belief was their answer to the problem of

evil, namely that God is good but not omnipotent, and though resistant to evil not strong enough to defeat it. What was abhorrent to Mani was to make the Creator supremely good and powerful, since that must end by making him responsible for the evil in his creation.

The evidence shows that Manichees were not recruited from the ignorant poor, and were in some cases reasonably educated people. Augustine specifically says that their books were not only finely bound but also written in 'a good Latin'. However, Mani's religion could be attractive only to those on the fringe of the Church. Those who joined them learnt a fantastic mythology designed to explain the eternal polarity of good and evil. Eclipses were explained by saying that the sun and moon were veiling their sight from the dreadful cosmic battles. The more Augustine learnt about astronomy, the greater the tension in his adherence to the Manichee faith. The *Confessions* shows that he continued in association with the Manichee community for a decade, even though towards the end of that time he was rapidly losing confidence in the system. In youth he had accepted Manicheism because he believed to be valid both its claim to be true Christianity and its grounds for rejecting Catholic orthodoxy. By the time he reached Milan he still regarded its negative criticisms of orthodoxy as valid, but had ceased to accept the Manichee mythology without which the system seemed to disintegrate.

Augustine was a born teacher. He began by opening his own school at Thagaste, but then moved to Carthage, second city of the western empire. There turbulent students impelled him to Rome, where fees were higher and pupils quieter. But the dishonesty of Roman students in swindling teachers (strikingly paralleled in Alexandria at this period) made him interested in a vacant post at Milan, which had the further attraction of being the seat of the court of Valentinian II, the western emperor. Manichee friends in Rome put his name to the strongly pagan prefect of Rome, Symmachus, who listened to a probationary discourse and no doubt ascertained that Augustine was no Catholic Christian and safe to send. Skilled orators and writers not infrequently found their way to high office. A striking parallel to Augustine's secular career is found in his elder contemporary Aurelius Victor, author of a surviving history of the empire, who was born in Africa of modest rural parents, but by his studies elevated himself; he became governor of Pannonia and later (389)

prefect of Rome. At Milan Augustine gained entrance to the houses of powerful and rich senators, on whom ambitious young men would call during the afternoon. Augustine's secular ambitions, however, met with frustrating checks because he lacked money. If only he could acquire a rich wife, the dowry would provide the necessary premium for obtaining office. Almost all important appointments were for sale, a system that saved the fisc cash and simultaneously made room for some gifted candidates, like Augustine, without much class.

At Milan Augustine still had with him the Carthaginian mate, of low social status, whom he had picked up at the age of 17. She was no intellectual companion for him. Early in their liaison she produced a son, unwanted but then deeply loved. Named Adeodatus, he was clever and a source of pride to his father. (He died when only 17). If at Milan Augustine's ambitions were to be realized, his concubine was a liability. She would hardly do at government house, but in any event only a wife with a fat dowry could bring success. His mate's inferior social status made marriage out of the question in law and in social convention. So she returned to Carthage, and the parting was exquisitely painful on both sides. Meanwhile the strenuous efforts of Monica produced a fiancée; the marriage was deferred because the girl was still only 10 or 11 years old. In Roman law the minimum age was 12.

To modern readers nothing in Augustine's career seems more deplorable than his dismissal of his son's mother, the concubine of fifteen years. In the mentality of the fourth century no one would have been outraged unless the person concerned were a professing and baptized Christian, which at the time Augustine was not. Texts other than Augustine's disclose that for a young man it was regular custom to take a concubine until such time as he found a suitable fiancée, marriage being understood as a property deal between the two families. The bride's dowry was crucial. The modern criticism is not of Augustine so much as of the total society in which he was a member. His world was not very different from ours in this.

Augustine himself in episcopal retrospect came to judge his liaison with his partner as 'my sin'. As the couple were entirely faithful to one another and as, for the Church (as is shown by a canon of a Council at Toledo in 400), cohabitation by persons not legally married was no bar to communion provided they kept wholly

to one another, this negative judgement may seem strong. The judgement hangs together with Augustine's mature doctrine of the proper nature of marriage. He describes his relationship to his concubine as a mere indulgence in physical satisfaction and 'habit'. (In Latin, 'habit', *consuetudo*, is an attested euphemism for marital intercourse.) What was absent was the intention to raise a family, the lifelong vow of fidelity, the sacramental bond. For the mature Augustine the indispensable and structural elements that constitute marriage are strikingly non-physical. Repeatedly in the *Confessions* he contrasts a marriage centred on companionship and responsible raising of a family with a merely physical relationship centred upon the satisfaction of appetite.

Augustine specifically mentions that he was talked out of marrying by his intimate friend and former pupil Alypius. A furtive sexual experience in early adolescence had left Alypius with a lasting sense of revulsion. He found Augustine's delight in his partner astonishing and unintelligible. It is perhaps necessary to be on one's guard against supposing that the young unconverted Augustine was an uninhibited Romantic. Although like Plotinus he can use erotic imagery for the beatific vision, he resembled most other ancient people in not finding sexual experience a source of profound psychological liberation. In the ancient world few people (not at least the writers of the erotica in the fifth book of the *Greek Anthology*) thought in anything like that kind of way. Everyone acknowledged that the mating impulse ensures the survival of the human race. But all philosophers with a serious claim to be respected as wise moralists—Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Epicureans—were of one mind in being impressed by its risks and dangers and by the capacity of sexual desire to disrupt and even destroy the most rational of plans and intentions. None was more negative than the arch-hedonist Epicurus; and his follower, the Latin poet Lucretius, sharply formulated that general distaste for Venus and her works in the most impassioned section of his long poem 'On the nature of things'. If happiness is understood in terms of the reduction of emotional disturbance to the minimum, then the ancient attitude to sexuality is natural enough.

Augustine in his maturity accepted the consequence of his conversion. The negative Manichee attitude to sexuality was rejected, and replaced by many more positive statements than some writers have given Augustine the credit for. Against the Manichees he upheld

the essential goodness of the procreative impulse. The Pelagian controversy, however, led him to see the process of reproduction as the transmitter of the irrationality and egotism that infects the sexual urge. By his stress on 'concupiscence' (uncontrolled desire) he set the West on the path to identifying sin with sex; that was not his intention.

Augustine came to think it an ingredient in the misery of the human condition that the sexual impulse is so frequently disobedient to the mind's higher intentions and instructions. Because it can tend to animality, it all too easily becomes destructive of both friendship and self-respect. After he had become a bishop, the counselling of married couples in trouble occupied much of his time and care, and he was well aware of the inconstancy of the human heart, of the tendency to have minor and trivial affairs which he once stigmatized as 'a male disease', and of the existence of husbands who knew their wives to be unfaithful to them but nevertheless found their embraces too enthralling to part with. Some men treated their wives as harlots.

His non-physical description of the essentials constituting marriage was in part influenced by his determination to affirm the bond between Joseph and Mary to be a genuine marriage. But the foundation for that affirmation was made possible by his belief that an ideal marriage is one of perfect mutual companionship. This portrait of an ideal marriage is painted in the fourteenth book of the *City of God*, where he sets out to describe the sexual bond between Adam and Eve before the Fall, a relationship controlled throughout by reason and will, never experiencing the frustration common to fallen mortals where the urge felt by one partner is not necessarily felt by the other at the same time; to both partners it was a source of the highest pleasure. The ideal language is rich in the sense of marriage as the supreme example of intimate friendship in mutual respect.

Adeodatus' mother was uneducated. Augustine came to find his own mother Monica possessed of great wisdom, but she spoke in a demotic syntax. In short, although he knew that well-educated and cultured women existed, yet they were the far side of the horizon. He himself never had one among his own circle of friends. So he felt sure that 'if God had wanted Adam to have a partner in scintillating conversation he would have created another man; the

fact that God created a woman showed that he had in mind the survival of the human race'. The observation (from his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, written not long after the *Confessions*) reflects Augustine's sense of antithesis and tension between a social estimate of marriage as a companionship with the meeting of minds and the business of reproduction. The society in which Augustine was raised took for granted the supportive and unpublic role of women. Yet near the end of the *Confessions* he would insist that men and women are entirely equal in mind and soul.

The personal crisis of his possible marriage, and the demeaning process of calling on powerful men of influence vainly hoping to enlist their support for his secular ambitions, coincided with an intellectual crisis. At Milan his lost belief in Mani was replaced by a scepticism about the possibility of any certainty. He devoured the writings of sceptical philosophers of the Academic school telling him that certainty is not available except in questions of pure mathematics. The psychological transition from radical scepticism to faith is sufficiently common to make it likely that his sceptical period on arrival at Milan prepared the ground for the coming conversion.

At Milan, however, there was a group of Platonists, some being Christians and others fellow-travellers, who used to read the treatises of Plotinus, who taught in Rome a century earlier, and of his biographer and editor Porphyry.[2] Some of their work had been translated from Greek into Latin by an eminent orator and teacher in Rome about 350, Marius Victorinus, who was himself impressed by the affinity between the Neoplatonists and the best Christian theology. In *Confessions* VIII Augustine recounts the narrative of Victorinus' final decision to offer himself for baptism, probably about 355, to the amazement of the pagan aristocracy of Rome. Plotinus, as his attack on the Gnostics shows (2. 9), cordially disliked theosophy, and Manicheism was uncongenial to the Neoplatonists generally. Sustained attacks survive from Alexander of Lycopolis in Egypt (about 300), and from Simplicius (about 530).

[2] In the *Confessions* Augustine does not specify the authors of 'the books of the Platonists' which influenced him. Scholars have disputed whether they were all tracts by Plotinus or all works by his pupil Porphyry. The probability is that Augustine read some by each of them. Since he also knew about the Neoplatonist Iamblichus (*c.*250–325) mentioned in *City of God* 8. 11, he is likely to have read other books from the Platonic school as well.

In particular the Platonic school offered a wholly different treatment of the problem of evil.

Three explanations were offered to mitigate the difficulty for affirming providence. First, the cosmos is a grand continuum, a great chain or hierarchy of being, descending by emanation from the highest to the lowest, from mind to matter, and in this graded series where existence is itself a good, the higher the level of being the higher the goodness. Therefore 'evil' is not Being but a lack of it, a deficiency inherent in having been placed on a lower step than higher entities. Since to exist is for a Platonist to be a 'substance', evil has no 'substance'. Secondly, matter is recalcitrant to beauty and form, and pulls the soul down to external things. Matter exploits a weakness in the will distorting it towards moral evil. Thirdly, evil results from the misuse of free choice by rational beings.

In Augustine's time there were a few educated people for whom all religion was superstition; but the dominant consensus held to belief in divine providence, visible in the mathematical order and coherence of the world, and given special manifestations to individuals by dreams and oracles. Design was evident to the eye. On the other hand the imperfection and contingency or indeterminacy of the world pointed to the existence of perfect and necessary Being, the ground of all existence. Nevertheless, twice in the *Confessions* (VI. v (7); VII. vii (11)) Augustine felt it necessary to affirm that, in all his wanderings, he never lost his belief in the being and the providence of God.

With a measured deliberation the *Confessions* records the absence of high motivations in the successive decisions which took him from a farm in the Numidian hills to the emperor's court at Milan. He left Thagaste for Carthage because his home town was painfully filled with associations with a dead friend; on to Rome because of student turbulence, and thence to Milan because of student dishonesty and because Manichees and a pagan city prefect used influence on his behalf. So it was that he 'came to Ambrose the bishop', and discovered how different Christian faith was from what he had supposed. Ambrose's sermons were certainly very different from the kind of thing he might have heard in some of the North African churches, where discourses lacked much rational structure. Through all his wanderings he discerned in retrospect the watchful hand of