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# AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

*a biography*

*by*

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## PHILOSOPHY

Some months later, in the autumn of 386, Augustine could write to Romanianus: 'We never ceased to sigh for Philosophy, and thought of nothing but of that form of life which we had agreed to live among ourselves. This we did continuously, though with less keenness, thinking that it was enough just to entertain the prospect. Since that flame which was to burn us up entirely had not yet flared up, we thought that the glow that warmed us slowly was the greatest there could be. Suddenly, some substantial books appeared . . . and sprinkled on this little flame a few small drops of precious ointment. They started up an incredible blaze, incredible, Romanianus, quite incredible, more than you might perhaps believe if I told you. What can I say? It was more powerful than I, myself, can bring myself to believe. After this, how could honour, human pomp, desire for empty fame, the consolations and attractions of this dying life, move me. Swiftly, I turned completely in upon myself.'<sup>1</sup>

Augustine's reading of the Platonic books had done one thing which everyone could understand: they had brought Augustine to a final and definitive 'conversion' from a literary career to a life 'in Philosophy'. This conversion was bound to affect Augustine's public and private life. Beyond this, nothing could be certain. If it was possible for a young man, in Carthage, in the 370's, to read an exhortation to Philosophy by Cicero . . . , and straightway to become a Manichee, the repercussions of having read Plotinus in Milan could be no less unpredictable. 'Conversion' is a very wide term: how drastically would this reorientation alter Augustine's life? 'Philosophy', also, could mean many things: what would be the precise nature of this 'Philosophy'? As it is, Augustine's 'conversion to Philosophy' is one of the most fully-documented records of such a change in the ancient world; its

<sup>1</sup> *C. Acad.* II, ii, 5.

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surprising thing about Augustine, at this time, was that he should have identified Philosophy with some form of Christianity. Ever since his first, abortive 'conversion to Philosophy' at Carthage, Augustine had moved within a horizon in which Christianity and Wisdom were thought of as coinciding. But the difference between a Manichaean version of Christianity and this Christian Platonism is enormous: the Manichees excluded any process of growth and intellectual therapy; they had claimed to offer him an esoteric 'Wisdom' which would make him pure.<sup>1</sup> Augustine had found that this 'Wisdom' had enabled him to 'make no progress',<sup>2</sup> while he now felt that he had entered into a life 'in Philosophy' in which progress was assured.

It is this confident sense of being able to develop his intellect creatively within the framework of the Catholic church that would have made Augustine seem strange even to so cultured a bishop as Ambrose. The reading of the Platonic books had ensured one thing: Augustine, who had come to Milan as a disillusioned careerist, not averse to falling back on the established religion of his parents, did not, in the end, make an act of unconditional surrender to the Catholic bishop. He was very definitely not a *type croyant*, such as had been common among educated men in the Latin world before his time. He did not believe that philosophy had proved sterile, and, so, that the methods of the philosophers could be replaced by a revealed Wisdom. Ambrose, for all his use of pagan authors, seems to have taken this old-fashioned view. He thought of himself first and foremost as a bishop, whose duty it was to understand and communicate to his flock the 'sea' of the Scriptures. Anything that could not be poured into this single mould was valueless. He once wrote to a philosopher who was perplexed by the problem of the nature of the soul, a problem which was to obsess Augustine at Cassiciacum, that he should read the Book of Esdras.<sup>3</sup> He answered the letter in which Augustine, in asking to be baptized, had also laid bare his perplexities, (if only this letter had survived!), by recommending him to read the Book of Isaiah. Augustine found the book quite incomprehensible!<sup>4</sup> Later, Ambrose even came to believe that Julian the Apostate had lapsed from Christianity when he had 'given himself over to Philosophy';<sup>5</sup> and this is exactly what Augustine, in a series of works and letters, proudly proclaimed himself to be doing in Cassiciacum! The difference between the two men is a symptom of a change of momentous consequence in

<sup>1</sup> *de mor. eccl. cath.* (I), xxv, 47. v. sup. pp. 59-60.

<sup>2</sup> Ambrose, *Ep.* 34, 2 (P.L. xvi, 1119).

<sup>3</sup> Ambrose, *de obitu Theodosii*, 51 (P.L. xvi, 1466).

<sup>4</sup> *Conf.* V, x, 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Conf.* IX, v, 13.