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## **Critical Musings on Dixon's Augustine**

### **The Psyche of Augustine**

**A Review of Sandra Lee Dixon, *Augustine: The Scattered and Gathered Self* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999).**

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[1] Any new book on Augustine is a monument to authorial courage. No single author in Western religious literature has received more attention than Augustine. The secondary literature alone is so massive one could spend a life's work mastering it. Hundreds of monographs dealing with patristic themes crowd the shelves of the world's libraries. Nevertheless, despite the challenge, Sandra Dixon has decided to enter the fray with her new book, *Augustine: The Scattered and Gathered Self*. Dixon's book, however, is unusual; it is decidedly not a patristic monograph, offering instead a reading of Augustine inspired by the self-psychological theories of Heinz Kohut. The encounter between Augustine and modern psychoanalytic theory produces an interesting and stimulating narrative that all who study the sainted bishop should enjoy.

[2] What then are we to make of this book? Dixon is clearly to be commended for the sustained effort she has made to weave her psychological analysis seamlessly together with a careful attention to the culture and society of Augustine. She is very much aware of the charges of historical anachronism that have been levied against the authors of previous psychological studies. While the historical material in this volume is not itself original, it is thorough, and in general the transition from the historical and cultural observations to the more theoretical psychological analysis does not seem forced or arbitrary. She has largely, I think, achieved her goal of offering a culturally sensitive psychological reading. There are two areas of her analysis, however, that evoke some questions and deserve some comment.

The first is her treatment of the role of Neoplatonism in the intellectual development of Augustine. While all would agree that Neoplatonism was a dominant force in Augustine's life, one must also consider the counter-balancing forces of the fifth-century asceticism and of the Bible itself. Both of these forced significant modifications to the neo-platonic system. These opposing forces are not adequately addressed in the book. Likewise, I was somewhat puzzled by Dixon's understanding of how Augustine wrestled with grace and freedom. She discusses this struggle without any reference to Pelagius and to the theological themes of that controversy. Finally I would like to comment briefly on the value of this kind of psychological reading. Is such a reading "historical," does it blend into our own autobiography, and, if yes, is that a problem?

[3] As I mentioned earlier, Dixon makes a real effort to take seriously historical and cultural studies of late antiquity and to place her psychological interpretation within that context. In support of this assessment, I would like to offer two examples, one specific and one general, of her success in achieving an integration of these disparate disciplines. The first is her discussion of Augustine's relationship with his concubine, and the second is her discussion of the broad context of Augustine's conversion. Both of these are among the best that I have ever read.

[4] For many contemporary readers, one of the most difficult stories in the Confessions is that narrating Augustine's separation from his concubine in order to become engaged to a ten year old girl. When undergraduate students encounter this detail, they are invariably disgusted, despite their rather vocal commitment to cultural relativism. Dixon does a masterful job setting the context of ancient concubinage and marriage. Her narrative allows the reader to see more clearly the actual moral implications of Augustine's actions. They are not disgusting, illegal perversions, but legal and common occurrences in late antique society. Yet, as Dixon remarks, his actions are not made admirable by being socially acceptable (110). They were in fact, wrong, and Augustine believed them to be such. Too often discussions of Augustine's treatment of his concubine focus on the social acceptability of concubinage without recognizing Augustine's moral failure; Dixon does both.

[5] Her discussion here also leads seamlessly into a fascinating discussion of the psychological impact on Augustine of the loss of his concubine. She describes this loss, along with a series of other factors, as waging a continuing assault on Augustine's "grandiosity" (Kohut's term). He was caught in the middle of a complex web of interaction between his society's expectations of him and his own injured self. The combined sheer of these forces created a "vertical split" (122) in his psyche that came dangerously close to a severance. The Augustine Dixon describes living in Milan is, to use a modern phrase, extraordinarily stressed and psychologically fragile. Her assessment is both compelling and convincing.

[6] More generally, I was impressed with Dixon's ability to set Augustine's entire conversion and subsequent Christian life in a larger context. Chapters 6, "Conversion at the Limits of the Self," and 7, "Christian Life Up to 397," are particularly deft at seeing Augustine as a product of a life lived in a society and culture rather than as a kind of instant Christian converted to God all at once. The rhetoric of the Confessions suggest the latter, but Dixon walks around the conversion event, exploring the long process leading up to it and the

psychological factors that may have been at work. She also walks past it and looks carefully at the long years of life that followed it. Augustine did not stop being Augustine in the years after his conversion. His self was still there, and he had to continue to wrestle with many of the same issues throughout his life. Dixon's Augustine loses some of the iconic qualities useful to theologians, apologists, and preachers, but he gains dramatically in humanity.

[7] Other aspects of the book, however, do raise some questions. A key feature of Dixon's treatment of Augustine is the role that the classical tension between the one and the many played in the psychology of Augustine. Her basic point, if I understand her correctly, is that Augustine seized upon the Neoplatonic concept of the one, which he learned about from Ambrose and other Christian intellectuals, as a way to cope with basic problems associated with duality, such as the nature of evil, bodily life, and even psychic confusion. This is, of course, not a new insight. Both the Greek preoccupation with the one and the many and Augustine's sense of liberation at discovering "the books of the Platonists" are well known. What is different about Dixon's reading is that she attempts to fit Augustine's deep attraction to Platonism into the framework of the depth self-psychology of Heinz Kohut. Hence, what appears on the surface as a theological and philosophical resolution to intellectual problems becomes, for Dixon, the replacement of the Augustine wounded "grandiosity" (something I take to be akin to "ego strength") with "idealization" (here God).

[8] Without commenting on the value of Kohut's theories, I wonder if Dixon overstates the impact of Platonism and does not develop enough the counter forces working on Augustine. The vision at Ostia and the few glimpses of Augustine's personal struggles that we can glean from the last books of the Confessions do not really tell us very much about what Augustine's everyday experience may have been. Dixon risks portraying Augustine as a kind of melancholy, wounded Neoplatonic mystic. I wonder how the discussion would have been different had she included a more sustained discussion the way in which both the Bible and the ascetical movement served to temper and to transform Neoplatonic longings.

[9] The Bible always posed a problem for Augustine. In part, it was an obstacle to faith. It was written in an elementary and rhetorically poor style that was difficult for one so well trained in rhetoric to take seriously. Clearly the spiritual exegesis of the sort introduced by Ambrose transformed Augustine's understanding of the Bible, but this was not just a Neoplatonic movement. The spiritual reading of scripture had many practitioners and was generating considerable debate among Christian intellectuals. It is not reducible to a Neoplatonic longing for the one, pure and simple. The collision of the biblical and platonic traditions often produced a combination of figurative and literal interpretations that are puzzling to modern readers. It is not, however, always the case that the spiritual reading always trumps the literal, or that the spiritual readings are always platonizing. In other words, Augustine and others did not just platonize Christianity, they also christianized Platonism.

[10] Dixon also suggests, reflecting the conclusions of many others, that Augustine's Platonism led to a devaluation of the body. However, it is also true that the Bible led him to value it. Hence, in the City of God he speculates at length on the character of heavenly bodies, the future function of human genitalia, and the heavenly status of a life-time of hair and finger nail growth. Clearly more could be said in the book about how the Bible's

affirmation of creation impacted the psychology of Augustine and modified some of the basic principles of Neoplatonism.

[11] Similarly, I wonder how a sustained consideration of the ascetical movement would affect Dixon's reading. While many ascetics maligned the body, it is also true that they were engaged in a kind of body sculpting. They believed that they were disciplining their bodies not so much to obtain release from them, but to transform them into something like the kind of body promised by Saint Paul. Augustine the Neoplatonic ascetic is always tempered by Augustine the Christian ascetic. While Augustine may indeed have continued to wrestle with his demons all his life and even to have longed for union with "the one" [God], there is evidence to suggest that he also came to appreciate the particular aspects of God's creation. Dixon's remarks seem somewhat too narrowly focused here.

[12] Similar concerns emerge from her discussion of Augustine's work *To Simplicianus* and the emergence of his new understanding of Romans and concomitant emphasis on God's grace over human freedom. Again, that Augustine reread Paul in the late fourth century and changed his mind about human freedom is well known. Dixon, however, tends to read this transformation as the replacement of injured grandiosity with idealized reliance on God. In other words, it is addressed primarily as an inner psychological movement. She never mentions Pelagius and the complex matrix of theological issues that Augustine struggled to understand. Here the work of Robert Markus can be helpful. In his view, Augustine's reaction to Pelagius can be traced at least in part to a rejection of extreme forms of asceticism. According to Markus, both Augustine's pastoral and personal experience made room for compassion; he was, in a word, more willing to live with mediocrity than were his more ascetically-minded peers. Hence, he defends the value of marriage and the basic dignity of the average Christian person slugging his or her way through life without much theological or spiritual sophistication. Dixon's discussion risks presenting Augustine's theology of grace as merely a self-sustaining coping strategy. Augustine's theology of grace and freedom is not just a reflection on his inner life; it is also a reflection on his pastoral context and the needs of ordinary people.

[13] I believe that Dixon's intent was to show that Augustine managed to create a coherent sense of self and see with a maturity and depth that escapes most people. In other words, I think she believes that Augustine was a success as a human being. He was, to borrow her rich phrase, "not a water buffalo." As Dixon explains, "I conclude that Augustine still was moved, unknowingly, by his repressed childhood desires and disappointments, even as he became able to draw love of God and love of neighbor into one relatively healing pattern of life and thought" (208). Giving more attention to these historical details would, I think have helped to communicate this conviction more forcefully.

[14] For my final point I would like to reflect briefly on the value of this kind of study. I want to underscore that my reactions here are purely from the point of view of one unfamiliar with the particulars of the psychology of religion. Having said that, my first impulse as one trained in traditional historical methods is to say that such readings are anachronistic. It is absolutely certain that Augustine did not understand his own experience in the way that Dixon describes it. For him, any integration of his personality that he experienced, any resolution of conflict, and any personal transformation were attributable to

the direct action of God. Yet, if Kohut's theories of self development are true, then they may in fact be historically true of Augustine. Clearly ancient people died of cancer even though they did not know the cause. I, however, do not know if Kohut's theories are true.

[15] Nevertheless, as one interested in postmodern views of history, I am more inclined than ever to see the historical Augustine, like the historical Jesus, slip away from my efforts to grasp him. Similarly, it seems to me that the actual subjective experience of ancient people is something that easily eludes us. There is too much distance, both temporal and cultural, between us and them to make such judgments possible, even when corrected by the conviction that there is continuity in human experience across the ages. Still, this is not necessarily bad news. Augustine, in a way, has become a possession of the Church. No other ancient Christian life is more accessible to us than his. Because of this, all Western Christian experience tends to be filtered through his experience. When we reflect on our own Christian experience, Augustine lurks in the shadows.

[16] Reading Augustine, then, is always part history and part autobiography. This, at any rate, is how I am inclined to read Dixon. On the one hand, she illuminates Augustine's experience of self, but on the other, and I think, more forceful hand, she shows how Augustine's experience, when refracted through modern psychological theory, can illuminate our own. And so she closes her book with a real, albeit muted, appreciation for a life well lived. The theologian in me wishes only that she had added a little more emphasis to a theme that appears briefly throughout the book and that is captured by a line from page 23: "If I can introduce you to a sufficiently Augustinian understanding of Augustine's life and thought, you, too, may imagine that God could work in ways as complex as those we are about to encounter."

[17] On the whole, the book succeeds because it is both unorthodox and interesting. As Dixon explains, "People influenced by clinical views in psychology can dismiss the theological view as antiquated, and theologians - or historians - can ignore the psychological views as theologically or historically unsophisticated" (40). After reading this text, some members of these guilds may be inclined to change their minds.