

Lecture 3: Augustine's Vanquishing of Christian Anti-Intellectualism

CAU 2023 — Scott MacDonald, Cornell University

Augustine, *Confessions* (3.7-8) [tr. T. Williams, Hackett Pub. Co. (2019)]

5 [3.7] Among them, at that feeble age, I was studying the books of eloquence. I longed to make a name for myself as a rhetorician, to gratify my damnable and arrogant love of human vanity. In the normal course of study I came across a book
10 by an author named Cicero, whose tongue nearly everyone admires, though not so much his heart. This book of his, called Hortensius, contains an exhortation to philosophy. That book changed my way of feeling; it changed my prayers to you, O Lord; it created new resolves and new desires in me. In an instant all vain hope became repugnant to me, and my heart was on fire with an incredible longing for
15 the immortality of wisdom. I began to arise and return to you. I did not put this book to use in order to sharpen my tongue, which was what I was meant to be doing with my mother's money in this, the nineteenth year of my age (my father having died two years before). No, I did not put this book to use in order to sharpen my tongue: what had won me over was not the style, but the substance.

20 [3.8] With what passion, my God, with what great passion I longed to fly away from earthly things to you, and I did not know what you would make of me. [a] For "with you is wisdom" (Job 12:13, 16). [b] Now the love of wisdom has in Greek the name "philosophy," and it was this love that those writings set aflame in me. [c] There are those who lead others astray through philosophy, using that great and alluring and honorable name to whitewash their errors and wrap them in a false
25 beauty; and nearly all such people, both in those days and earlier, are identified and exposed in that book. [d] The healthful admonition of your Spirit through your good and dutiful servant is also made manifest there [in Cicero's book]: "See to it that no one deceive you through philosophy and empty seduction, according to human
30 tradition, according to the elements of this world, and not according to Christ. For in Christ dwells all the fullness of Godhead bodily." (Col. 2:8-9). In those days, as you know, O Light of my heart, these words of the Apostle were unknown to me. [e] No, what delighted me in that exhortation was just this: it encouraged me not to follow this or that sect but instead to love wisdom itself, whatever it should turn out
35 to be, and to love it and seek after it and pursue it and hold on to it and embrace it with all my strength. And the book stirred me and set me aflame, and I was filled with passionate longing. [f] But in my great ardor there was just one thing that held me back: the name of Christ was not there. . . .

Augustine, *Letter 120* [tr. Roland Teske, New City Press (2003)]

35 Heaven forbid, after all, that God should hate in us that by which he made us more excellent than the other animals [namely, our reason]. Heaven forbid, I say, that we should believe in such a way that we do not accept or seek a rational account, since we could not even believe if we did not have rational souls. (i.3)

40 One who now understands by true reason what he before only believed should certainly be preferred to one who still desires to understand what he believes. But if he does not even desire to understand and thinks that those things which should be understood ought only to be believed, he does not know the benefit faith brings. (ii.8)

Augustine, *On Free Choice* (book 2) [tr. S. MacDonald]

45 For unless it is one thing to believe and another to understand, and unless we ought first to believe the great and divine matter that we desire to understand, there would have been no point in the prophet's saying, "Unless you have believed, you will not understand" (Isaiah 7:9). Moreover, our Lord himself, by both word and deed,
50 exhorted those whom he called to salvation to believe first. Later, when he was speaking about the gift that was to be given to those who believe, he did not say, "This is eternal life, that they may believe," but rather, "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the true God, and the one whom you have sent, Jesus Christ" [John 17:3]. Moreover, to those who already believe he says, "Seek and you will find" [Matthew 7:7]. For something that is unknown and [merely] believed cannot be said
55 to have been found, nor can anyone be prepared for finding God unless he has first believed what is later to be known.

Augustine, *On the Trinity* (9.1) [tr. McKenna/Matthews, Cambridge University Press (2002)]

60 Let us not doubt faithlessly the things to be believed, and let us affirm without rashness the things to be understood; in the former case, authority is to be upheld; in the latter, the truth is to be sought. With regard to the question at hand, therefore, let us believe that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one God, the Creator, and the ruler of all creation; that the Father is not the Son, nor is the Holy Spirit the Father or the Son, but that there is a trinity of inter-related persons, and the unity of
65 an equal substance. But let us seek to understand this, imploring the help of Him whom we wish to understand; and in the measure that He shall grant, desiring to explain what we understand. . . .