

**AUGUSTINE: ANCIENT THOUGHT BAPTIZED** by John M. Rist.  
*Cambridge University Press. 1994. xix + 334 pp. £40.00*

Why do we read St Augustine? And a related question: how should we read St Augustine? The contemplative meditates on a passage of the *Confessions*; the philosopher dissects an argument from *Against the Sceptics*; the social historian sifts the sermons to snatch a glimpse of the everyday life of the bishop's flock. All these are legitimate uses of his writings. But in order to understand his thought as fully and as fairly as possible, we need to turn first to the historian of ideas. In particular, if we are to resist the ever-present temptation of reading so authoritative a theologian either in our own image, or in our enemy's image, we must learn to strip away, where they mislead, the layers of interpretation imposed by subsequent generations. We must attempt to read Augustine in the light of his predecessors rather than of his successors; to understand how he inherited, appropriated and transformed the raw material of his thought. Then we might see more clearly how subsequent generations in their turn transformed the material they drew from him.

Few scholars are as well equipped as John Rist to guide us in this task. Professor of Classics and Philosophy at the University of Toronto, he began his writing career with a book on Plotinus, and since then has written on a wide range of ancient philosophical, and also some Patristic, subjects. In particular, Rist uses his knowledge of ancient Platonism to illuminate with precision both the continuities between Augustine's thought and pagan philosophy, and his critique of that philosophy. The result is a philosopher's book that is refreshingly historical, and that in two respects: first, Augustine is placed firmly in the intellectual context of his own age; and secondly, Rist (with most recent scholars) has an acute sense of the development of Augustine's thought over time. Consequently, we are shown the saint in the very process of thinking through the problems he tackles. It is only once the hard work of historical analysis has been done that Rist moves on to philosophical comment.

This approach enables Rist to show quite how heavily Augustine used non-Christian philosophy. Even so Christian a doctrine as the Fall owes much, in Augustine's interpretation, to Plotinus' *tolma*, self-assertive pride (p 97). Augustine's focus on moral intention finds an earlier parallel in the Stoics: their analysis of virtue in terms of reason is simply replaced with his own in terms of love. And even the theme of love is, as Rist argues powerfully, a pagan theme baptized. Augustine is at one with the greatest ancient philosophers in his fundamental recognition of the beauty of goodness, and his consequent fascination with desire.

Even some of the developments in Augustine's thought take place within the framework constructed by Classical philosophy. Analysis of his epistemology has tended to concentrate on his early anti-sceptical arguments, or his account of the relation between faith and reason. Rist notes that the shift in focus from certainty to understanding was in effect a shift from Stoic to Platonic concerns, and brought with it some of the

Platonist's distrust of 'knowledge' of the changing world. Indeed, his deep sense of *ignorantia* and *difficultas*, of human insufficiency in short, underpins diverse branches of Augustine's mature thought: epistemology and psychology, soteriology and eschatology, ethics and politics. It is in politics that the sharpest contrast with Classical philosophy can be drawn; the optimism of the theorist of the Classical *polis* or the Roman *respublica* must seem mere *hubris* in Augustine's darker world.

The subtitle of the book is 'ancient thought baptized'. The analytic philosopher will find relatively little examination of detailed argumentation here. That is because Rist is more interested in a broad understanding of the overall structures of Augustine's thought. When he closes in on an argument it is to pinpoint its crucial hinges, not its every move. Moreover, his concern is Augustine's thought in a more than narrowly philosophical sense. He protests against an anachronistic understanding of what philosophy should be. Augustine, once converted, used the Bible to *think with*. Far from limiting his intellectual freedom, it stimulated him to discover new solutions to old philosophical problems. Scripture for him was an aid, not an alternative, to reason.

Scripture was one source of evidence. Experience was a second. It was meditating on these twin sources that moulded Augustine's thought out of its raw Platonist material. In the public arena it is obvious how the facts of life in late antique North Africa—poverty, violence and corruption within, and warfare without—helped forge the *City of God* with its ironic undercutting of human political pretensions. Attention to the *Confessions* has suggested Augustine's personal experience as another source for his steady distrust of human capacities and aspirations. Rist hints occasionally at a third element of experience: the preaching and pastoral work of a busy bishop. The theme might be fruitfully developed. Episcopal responsibility brought Augustine and his friends into close contact with the hardship, poverty, dishonesty and ignorance of everyday life. The raw material of their analysis of the human condition would have been very different had they remained in philosophical retirement in Cassiciacum.

The theological paradox for Augustine was that man was both dust (the potter's clay) and yet made in the image of God. It is in his failure to overcome 'the disharmony between two visions of the relationship between God and man' that Rist identifies a tragic flaw in Augustine's thought (p 277). Had he allowed himself to develop more fully the implications of his theology of love, his account of God's justice might have lost its arbitrary harshness. He should have been truer to his (baptized) Platonist instincts.

Rist's last chapter is at first sight curious. Entitled 'Augustinus redivivus', it is introduced with the words, 'Suppose Augustine to have been allowed to return to life in the late twentieth century to write his *Reconsiderations* again' (p 290). How would 'Augustine revived' have developed his own theology in the light of new exegetical, philosophical and theological knowledge and understanding, while remaining true to his original purposes of combating the enemies of the Church, and in

particular Pelagians? Rist then sketches the outline of a contemporary Augustinian theology on this basis.

Why, one might wonder, ought one to want to do such a thing? Rist's uncompromisingly historical analysis should have made us wary of believing in an unchanging *philosophia Augustiniana perennis*. Augustine's work was of its own age, and even if, as Rist several times insists, he was uncannily aware of its potential future significance, later generations would produce their own 'Augustinisms', often with sorry results. Is it not better for us simply to read him as historians and leave it there? It would seem more honest to learn our theology directly from one another, and claim no spurious authority for it.

Rist prefaces his work with a famous quotation from Tacitus, 'sine ira et studio quorum causas procul habeo'. As a comment on his historical method, the quotation is apt. But perhaps Rist the philosopher has his tongue, in appropriately Tacitean style, at the edge of his cheek. Like Augustine, he is a Catholic philosopher. And his device of revivifying Augustine is a Catholic one. It is not clear to me that a non-Christian philosopher will learn a great deal from Augustine, except from his early works. But a Catholic philosopher can share enough of his methods and principles both to learn from his insights and to develop or modify them where necessary: to debate, in short, with *Augustinus redivivus*. By distinguishing his intellectual history precisely from his philosophical and theological exploration of Augustine's ideas, Rist shows himself clear and honest about what he is doing.

Historians of ideas have much to learn from this book. Those who are primarily theologians should no longer be able to get away with easy condemnations, or easy eulogies, of what passes for Augustine's theology. The new challenge is to debate with and learn from a more complex, less smoothly consistent thinker, whose meditation on God and man from the viewpoint of his own turbulent age still offers disturbingly relevant food for thought.

MARGARET ATKINS

**TEXT, CHURCH AND WORLD: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE** by Francis Watson. *T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1994. viii + 360pp. £24.95.*

As the title suggests, this is a book advocating the primacy of systematic theology within biblical studies. The Preface clarifies this objective by explaining the use of the terms 'text', 'church', and 'world'. The book itself is in four parts.

Part One concerns the use of the text within the church. In this case, a theological reading of Scripture is consonant with the ecclesial shaping of the text in its final form. Chapter Two, 'Canon and Community' best illustrates this agenda, where Watson develops (and overall defends) Childs' and Brett's canonical approach, and their emphasis on the final form, comparing these with the critiques of Barton, Barr and Sanders.