

John J. O'Meara, *Understanding Augustine*. Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 1997. Pp. 165. \$65.00 (cloth).

We are indeed most fortunate in having this valuable volume which brings together what were previously scattered studies by one of the leading Augustine scholars of the twentieth century. Yet the collection is much more than a material convenience. The juxtaposition of its component studies (some written many years apart) not only provides a new appreciation of the evolution of O'Meara's careful thought, but also contains precious insights into the ever-intriguing personality of Augustine.

The book opens with a Preface (pp. 9–12) containing some preliminary observations about *The City of God*. The first chapter is an Introduction (pp. 13–27) which presents Augustine to the reader, and is also O'Meara's introduction to his *An Augustine Reader: Selections from the Writings of Augustine* (Image Books, 1973). His immense influence on the West is proclaimed on the first page of the introductory chapter: "He set forth the mould in which Western Christendom was laid: he set it firmly and he set it fully. No one before or since had ever had such an opportunity in this regard" (p. 13).

For the novice reader, the earlier plan of Augustine's life is the subject of the first section (from p. 14 on) of the same opening chapter of the book.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the reader of the present volume is escorted in a masterful manner through the most salient features of the entire life of its subject, but continued on several occasions in the course of the introductory chapter. This is because the author touches on successive aspects of that life, weaving it into the various headings of the chapter—his works, his doctrine, his influence and his personality. The overall effect is both impressive and marvelously informative.

After the initial introductory chapter, the division of the main body of *Understanding Augustine* is first into three large plans, as follows:

- I. *Confessions*: Conversion (chapters 2–3: pp. 29–47),
- II. *City of God*: Charter of Christendom (chapters 4–7: pp. 51–105),
- III. *Genesis Understood Literally* (chapters 8–10: pp. 107–141 ).

For a final bonus there are also three concluding studies contained under Appendices (pp. 143–162). Each of these four plans will be dealt with in turn.

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1. As for that same part of this life, a book of great perceptiveness is also O'Meara's own *The Young Augustine* (1954).

Part I contains two chapters (2 & 3; the Introduction being reckoned as chapter 1), the first (chapter 2) being concerned with implications of Augustine's conversion while the second (chapter 3) contrasts immaterialism and materialism in Augustine and Eriugena. Regarding chapter 2, by far the best known part of the *Confessions* is the famous conversion scene in the eighth book. As O'Meara himself has so well observed of that scene and its effect on the readers of the book: "they will remember it long after other episodes described in the book have been forgotten."<sup>2</sup> Small wonder then that the great controversy over the authenticity of the conversion scene had raged for centuries, with the great majority of scholars stoutly maintaining its authenticity. In the more recent past, just as I was wading into the foggy fray, it all suddenly evaporated!

The rest of the second chapter of O'Meara's book is mainly polarized between the two great influences on Augustine's thought: namely Paul and the Neoplatonists. From one aspect, this amounted to a central tension between the material and the immaterial respectively. For Augustine, the command of Paul to put on the Lord Jesus Christ (featured so skillfully in the description of the conversion scene) contrasted starkly with the ideal of immaterialism espoused by the Neoplatonists and explicitly commanded by the dictum of Porphyry: "Omne corpus fugiendum est."

Much as the younger Augustine was indebted to those "Platonists" (as he calls them) for liberating him from a gross materialism (*Conf.* 7.9.13–20.26) nevertheless he did not support their doctrine of complete immateriality as the final ideal condition of humanity. In this denial, as O'Meara observes (p. 37), he departed from the opinions of two men whom he greatly admired, namely Ambrose and Origen. Later to join them was the Irishman Eriugena (ca. 810–ca. 877), who saw the redeemed human body as "a *complete passing into pure spirit*" (*Ibid.*).

In any case, Augustine was not too pleased with the body he bore in this life, and longed for the post-resurrectional, redeemed body. Meanwhile, he remained "ambivalent about love and the body which gives it physical expression" (p. 39). He therefore had a most negative attitude to sexuality and regarded the "concupiscence" which accompanied it as a defect arising from the Original Sin of our first parents. Even more pessimistic about the condition of humanity was his conviction that the great mass of humanity was predestined irrevocably to eternal damnation (*City of God* 13.23.3).

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2. P. 59 in his "Arripui, aperui, et legi," *Augustinus Magister* vol. I, [1954], 59–65.

The second part (chapter 3) of part II of the book contrasts the approaches to Neoplatonic immaterialism in Augustine and the Irishman Eriugena. As O'Meara expresses it at the end of the first paragraph: "There is a profound and perhaps revealing difference between looking at darkness as a symbol of something transcendently superior to light (Eriugena's approach) and on the other hand greatly inferior to it (Augustine's)" (p. 43).

Next, O'Meara raises the question of the problems posed by Augustine's early infatuation with Neoplatonism on the one hand, and on the other, Christ's incarnation and the resurrection of redeemed bodies after the general judgment. In actual fact, Augustine was saved from such a conflict by the fact that his passion for Neoplatonic philosophy was displaced by his increasing immersion in the Scriptures consequent upon his ordination in 391. There were occasions when that philosophy proved useful, but only on an *ad hoc* basis, as in the *Commentary on Genesis' Understood Literally* (410–414). Augustine, with his ecclesiastical duties and his passion for doctrinal disputations, had no time for an abstract life ruled by pure Reason. For Eriugena by contrast, "philosophy supposes a God and is one with Theology, not hostile to it" (p. 47). Furthermore, in stark contrast to Augustine's belief in the eventual resurrection of the redeemed body, Eriugena sees it rather as being transformed from the material into the intelligible realm in keeping with what has been observed above.

Part II of the book (from p. 51 on) concerns Augustine's *City of God* and its four chapters are from O'Meara's corresponding book.<sup>3</sup> The first chapter in part II is chapter 4 in the present book and concerns the context and structure of the *City of God*. First, the author devotes several pages to the comfort and help which the work can provide when seen in the context of the uncertainty of modern times.

The next section of chapter 4 (beginning on p. 55) concerns the *City of God* seen in the relevant situation of its own times.<sup>4</sup> Despite the cataclysmic nature of the fall of Rome to the invading Goths in 410, the physical repercussions were small by comparison, as O'Meara observes. Rome, the capital of the

3. *Charter of Christendom: The Significance of the City of God* (The Saint Augustine Lecture for 1961 at Villanova University), New York, The Macmillan Company, 1961.

4. See also my "The Background to Augustine's City of God," *The Classical Journal* (Milwaukee) 67 (1972): 198–208. This article has recently been anthologized in Augustine II in the 21-volume series: *Great Political Thinkers* by Edward Elgar Publishing Limited (1997).

mighty Roman Empire, did indeed fall, but the invaders were relatively merciful and the sacking lasted only three days. Nevertheless, there was the ominous fact that seen in retrospect, the Edict of Toleration of Christianity in 313 marked a slow but sure decline in the fortunes of the Roman Empire.

When, in 376, the Visigoths crossed the frontier of the Danube, this proved to be but the first of an increasing number of barbarian incursions, climaxing some quarter-century later in the fall of Rome in 410. For the pagans, the cause was obvious enough. The gods of Rome were venting their anger at the suppression of the various pagan cults which had long fostered the fortunes of the Empire. When Augustine started writing the *City of God* in 413, its first ten books were directed at this very accusation. But more importantly still, the next twelve books are dedicated not only to the City of God, but also to the antagonistic City of Satan characterized by love of self to the extent of contempt for God.

The next section (from p. 59 on) concerns the interesting fact that, as certain scholars have shown,<sup>5</sup> the theme of the conflicting cities in Augustine's works long predated the fall of Rome in 410. Indeed, in 1845 J. J. Poujoulat well observed in his three-volume work on Augustine that the *City of God* should rather have been named the book of the Two Cities. The question has therefore arisen as to how much this idea is due to Augustine's nine years with the dualistic Manichees and their two Kingdoms, the one of Light and the other of Darkness. O'Meara also contributes some of his own fascinating observations on the anticipation of certain aspects of the *City of God* in Augustine's earliest works.

Another section in *Understanding Augustine* (from p. 62 on) concerns descriptions of the *City of God* by Augustine himself, beginning with his *Retractationes* and proceeding on to various sites inside the *City of God* itself. The final section (pp. 66–67) of chapter 4 in *Understanding Augustine* deals briefly with the structure of the City of God. In this regard, as one who has spent countless hours poring over its pages,<sup>6</sup> with the incredible number and variety of things that have come under its compass, I have well remembered (having much sympathy for it) the humorous epithet of Rev. Joseph Rickaby, S. J., who described the City of God as

5. A. Luras and H. Rondet, "Le thème des deux cités dans l'oeuvre de saint Augustin," *Études Augustiniennes*, Paris (1953) 99–160.

6. Our five-volume *Concordantia in XXII libros S. Aurelii Augustini De ciuitate Dei* is soon to be published by Georg Olms.

“Augustine’s scrapbook.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, despite its baroque style there is an organized structure to the work as is briefly explained by O’Meara in the last two pages of chapter 4.

Chapter 5 of *Understanding Augustine* is some 13 pages long and not organized into explicit sections. Its subject is the Bible, but, as the title of part II would imply, the Bible in relation to the *City of God*. The first point made, through the language of Augustine himself, is the authority of Scripture as the foundation of that city (p. 68). The evidence for this is seen by Augustine as the fulfillment of its prophecies, the miracles of Christianity and the flocking of all mankind to the faith established by Christ. After some elaboration of these topics, the author raises the question of the very title “City of God” which is seen to be found in Augustine’s beloved psalms (11.1 and 15.1) (p. 70). This, the spiritual-heavenly city, invites comparisons with the spiritual-earthly city and the carnal-earthly city (p. 71).

These differentiations raise other topics, like that of predestination and the notion of the earthly city as a source of replacements for those angels lost to the heavenly city through their rebellion. This should mean that the majority of men are predestined from all eternity to eternal damnation. In this condition they will be forever members of the city of the Devil, also known as the earthly (*terrena*) city, or the city of this world (*huius saeculi*) (p. 72).

Two topics of note in the succeeding pages are Augustine’s concept of evil (p. 73) and a gloomy catalog of the evils of the present life (p. 75). The author also examines the relations between the Church in this world and the *City of God* (p. 76). The Church in this world is exemplified in one of Augustine’s favorite parables, that of the cockles sewn among the wheat (Matt. 13.24–30) (p. 76). The concluding pages discuss the question of whether one can speak of Augustine’s City of God as a philosophy, or theology of history and the possible relations to other thinkers on these questions.

The third chapter in Part II which is devoted to the City of God is concerned with how Augustine, a citizen of the Roman Empire, was influenced by Greek thought in general and its philosophy in particular. The chapter opens, “With the late nineteenth century argument about whether Augustine, at the time of his baptism was “a Platonist tainted with Christianity, or a Christian tainted with Platonism.” (p. 81). To me, the question is a loaded one because

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7. *St. Augustine’s ‘City of God,’ A View of the Contents* (Burns, Oates & Washbourne Ltd.) London, 1952, p. 1.

of the word “tainted.” Formulated another way the question is deprived of much of its urgency: “At the time of his baptism, was Augustine a Christian Platonist, or a Platonic Christian?”

Later in the chapter the question is raised, which of the Platonists seems most to have influenced Augustine, particularly as author of the *City of God*. On p. 84 the author lists what philosophers Augustine usually meant by “Platonists” and concludes that the primacy must go to Porphyry. This is surprising in view of his fiercely anti-Christian treatise *Against the Christians*. For this reason, he does indeed get much attention in the *City of God*, but on the other hand he was also recommended to the attention of Augustine by two other singular traits: he believed in the excellence of Christ and that the God of the Hebrews was the true God (p. 89). However, Porphyry did not accept Christ as the universal and unique way of salvation, nor his incarnation and resurrection.

Near the end of the chapter, O’Meara lists three great Platonists to whom Augustine was particularly indebted: “From Plato he takes the point that mortal bodies can be made immortal; from Porphyry, that souls will not return to earthly bodies; and from Varro, that bodies dispersed can be reassembled so as to be reunited to their souls” (p. 91).

Yet Platonism was generally tied to metempsychosis, or the eternal recurrence of souls. Here O’Meara sees Porphyry as dissenting from the circularity of time, according to his fellow-Platonists and (through the influence of Christianity) pointing towards a linear destiny for the human soul.

The conclusion of part II of *Understanding Augustine* comes with Chapter 7, dealing with Rome in relation to the *City of God*. O’Meara points out how Augustine, having grown up in Roman North Africa, was deeply influenced throughout all his life by that imperial city. The same influence applied to his treatise entitled the *City of God*. Therefore, according to Augustine “a *res publica*...according to the definition of Scipio as given in Cicero’s *De Re Publica*, is the *res populi*.”<sup>8</sup> But, as Scipio argued, since a *populus*, or people, had to be bound together by common interest and there cannot be common interest unless it is mediated by justice, then without true justice, there cannot be a true state. Augustine’s next step is that there cannot be true justice without a state whose founder and ruler is Christ. Such does not apply to the Roman Empire, but only to the City of God. Therefore, as O’Meara concludes: “Augustine’s

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8. *City of God* 19.21.

attitude to Rome itself is, as one might expect, also twofold: theological and historical; she was absolutely evil; but relatively had a limited goodness" (p. 99).

Furthermore, since the cult of the gods was the unifying focus of Rome and these gods were really evil demons, then for Augustine the salvation of Rome and the instauration of true justice would begin with the fundamental aim of the City of God which is the overthrow of the rule of the demons (p. 101). Rome would therefore be fulfilled in Christianity (p. 103). An epilogue to chapter 7 contains an interesting conclusion by the author regarding the aim(s) of the *City of God*: "The City of God is, therefore, directly more concerned with justifying the Christian prohibition of polytheism than with defending the Christians against the charge of being responsible for the decline of Rome and its sack in AD 410" (p. 104).

Part III of Understanding Augustine is devoted to the topic of the book entitled: Genesis Understood Literally (*De Genesi ad Litteram*) which was written about 401 to 416. The first chapter (which is chapter 8 in *Understanding Augustine*) is entitled: "Augustine, Literal and Scientific: His Interpretation of Genesis on Creation." O'Meara says of the topic: "The prevailing mood, then, in the *De Genesi ad Litteram* is, in fact, one of prudent and comprehensive investigation issuing only sometimes in very tentative conclusions" (p. 110). Having accepted the account of creation in Genesis as true, Augustine made four attempts to explain the truth of the book, but was satisfied with none of them. The one which is the subject of this chapter is the last attempt. As the title of the work indicates, this interpretation was not a metaphorical, but a literal one. This does not exclude the possibility that the historical facts may not also be allegories (p. 113).

Furthermore, as O'Meara points out, when a teaching in science seems to contradict Scripture, unlike many church fathers, Augustine "listens with attention, in order to discover whether the contradiction is apparent or real" (p. 114). Indeed, as the author proceeds to demonstrate, Augustine possessed a considerable knowledge of the sciences of his time (pp. 116-7). However, in the light of more recent discoveries regarding Augustine and the physical heavens, distinctions must be made. True, he agreed with St. Paul that "star differs from star in brightness," (I Cor. 15.41) but for Augustine, the two greatest bodies in the heavens were Sun and Moon. Indeed, he is on record for having attacked some astronomers for maintaining that there were larger suns in the universe than our sun, only they appeared smaller because of being further away from the earth.<sup>9</sup>

When it comes to Augustine and his cosmography, modern scholars, whether from their reverence for the immense stature of Augustine, or from having scant empathy for earlier world-views, or both, can all too easily make an initial error which leads them on to larger ones.<sup>10</sup> So has it been with the phrase “*duae maximae partes mundi*” which Augustine uses in several places regarding the visible heaven and the earth. Despite the fact that it plainly means “the two greatest parts of the world,” translations vary from “two immense parts” to “two chief parts” and “two great parts,” or else the phrase is omitted completely.<sup>11</sup> When the phrase “*duae maximae partes mundi*” is translated as it is written, the implication must be that for Augustine, the visible heavens and the earth were related to one another like the two halves of a hamburger bun (to use a contemporary metaphor with some “bite” to it). This is confirmed elsewhere in his writings.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding next the physical heavens and the immense earth which they covered, Augustine gave priority to the former over the latter. The reason for this seems to be that for him they towered above all of physical creation and were the antechamber to the non-physical Heaven, which was therefore rightly called the “Heaven of heaven.”<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, in one of his earliest writings he has Reason address him with the amazing statement: “You are enraptured by the beauty and splendor of the heavens rather than by that of the earth.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, seen through Augustine’s conviction that the visible heavens were the antechamber to the Heaven of heaven, then the basis for that amazing statement becomes apparent. This conviction also accounts for his rancor towards the astronomers;<sup>15</sup> by their science they were trespassing on a sacred part of the universe. The chapter closes with miscellaneous considerations on Augustine and the sciences of nature.

9. *De Genesi ad Litteram* 2.16.33-34. Cf. *Epistola* 14.3 (389). See also the *Bibliothèque Augustinienne* edition of the *De Genesi ad Litteram*, vol. 48, pp. 607-09.

10. Some forty years ago, I had the privilege of being a student under the eminent Charles DeKoninck at Université Laval. While studying Aquinas’ commentary on one of Aristotle’s works, I came across the unforgettable statement: “*Parvus error in principio, magnus est in fine*” which applies with admirable aptness to the present topic.

11. See pp. 136-137 in my “Augustine’s Cosmography,” pp. 129-177 in *Augustinian Studies* 27/2 (1996).

12. See pp. 135-143 in the previous article.

13. See my “Augustine’s Cosmography,” *Augustinian Studies* 27/2 (1996): 129-177, especially from pp. 152 *ad finem*.

14. *Soliloquies* (386), 1.5.11 (translated by T. F. Gilligan O.S.A.).

15. *Confessiones* 5.3.4-5. The same is implied by his various attempts at ascent, as most memorably exemplified in the Vision at Ostia (*Confessiones* 9.10.23-25). It is also noteworthy that the word “ascendere” in its various forms is found seventeen times in the Confessions.



Chapter 9 (the second chapter of part III of the book) concerns the creation of man and woman. O'Meara opens the chapter with the traditional account of the creation by God, first of Adam, then of Eve but from a rib from the sleeping Adam. The author speculates that this signifies that Adam, the man, was one made in God's image, while Eve the woman, is not so made, but is a derivative product of man, and therefore of inferior status. To even things, the author proposes to explain the lesser known account of the creation of the first human pair.

First, it is pointed out that there are two accounts of that creation in the book of Genesis. The above traditional account is found in the second book (2.7 & 18-23), but more significant for equality of both is the account in the first book (1.26ff) where man is created as both male and female. Most of the rest of the chapter is devoted to explaining the ingenuity and resourcefulness of Augustine in reconciling both the above accounts.

Chapter 10 of *Understanding Augustine* treats of man and woman in Paradise, and the author observes that if Augustine maintains that woman's end is child-bearing and she is subject to Adam's orders, how can she be anything else but an inferior companion of man? Besides, Augustine himself stemmed from a lengthy tradition in which woman was inferior and even irrelevant to the world of men. While some of Augustine's influence on these matters derived from the more indulgent Roman word, his principal guidance came from the Scriptures. Here, while Jesus showed evident sympathy for women, the very influential Paul firmly reasserted the ancient tradition that woman was made for man. Notwithstanding this, O'Meara argues that Augustine's attitude was moderate and relatively "enlightened."

Considerations pass on to the fact that besides the obvious role of reproduction in this world, Augustine saw the greater role of human reproduction as being that of filling the empty places in Heaven which had been left by the fallen angels (p. 137). Once this goal was achieved, then the material world would end. Meanwhile, due to the fact that, in Augustine's opinion, very few people will meet the strict standards for entering heaven, the human race must have a longer residency on earth than it would otherwise have had.

Further, Augustine maintained that before their Fall in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve did not have sexual relations and would not have felt concupiscence (p. 137). It is noteworthy that, unlike some of the church fathers, Augustine did not see the theft of the forbidden fruit as symbolising sexual relations "stolen" prematurely. Finally, the author makes some observations on Augustine's attitude to women.

The ten chapters of the book are followed by three appendices on various aspects related to the preceding material. Each of these appendices will be briefly treated in turn.

The first appendix is entitled: "The Confession of St. Patrick and the Confessions of St. Augustine" and occupies just over four pages. O'Meara states his aim in the first paragraph: "I confine myself rigorously to the question of Patrick's possible use of the *Confessions* of Augustine when he was writing his own Confessions." Early in the piece, he acknowledges the previous efforts of some half-dozen authors in the same direction. The similarities and differences in the lives of both saints are then set out. Of principal interest here is that St. Patrick's work is only some 5,000 words long, while that of Augustine is more than twelve times that length. O'Meara also finds that the points of contrast between both saints and their confessions are far more numerous than the similarities. Included in these contrasts are style, sophistication, complexity, and the lives of both, particularly in regard to education, interests and circumstances. The author's conclusion is "even if Patrick had heard of, or even read, Augustine's *Confessions*, his own document reveals no sure echo of it." (p. 147).

The second appendix is entitled: "The Voice Bidding George Moore." Referring to Heinemann's 1947 edition of Moore's *Ave, Salve, Vale*, O'Meara says that in that novel Moore "claimed to have heard on three different occasions a voice bidding him pack his portmanteau and return to Ireland." In his own book, *Confessions of a Young Man* (Heinemann, 1928), Moore is on record as having declared: "St. Augustine's *Confessions* are the story of a God-tortured, mine [sc., Heinemann's] of an art-tortured soul." It would seem to follow that if the voice of Moore recalls that of Augustine in the conversion scene of his *Confessions*, then the association is intentional.

The third appendix concerns Toynbee and St. Augustine in regard to *A Study of History* of the former and the *City of God* of the latter. O'Meara opens his own study with the observation that both books are great and lengthy works and have much in common. Though comparisons between the two works have been attempted in the past, O'Meara states that they have been undertaken by scholars insufficiently familiar with the *City of God* of Augustine. Further, both authors "share a very remarkable poetic and visionary approach to life." (p. 153).

Augustine and Toynbee both disliked Rome, yet for different reasons. Augustine condemned it most memorably for its "libido dominandi" while for Toynbee his "dislike of Rome is so great that the Roman Empire, when considered in its most beneficial manifestations, is called a late Hellenic rally" (p. 154).

Both authors are mercilessly self-critical, for as O'Meara observes: "One should recall that the volume of Toynbee's *Study of History* in which he indulges in such merciless self-criticism is called "Reconsiderations" and would, he says, have been called *Retractationes* if his reading audience would permit it (p. 156).

Finally, among other similarities noted by O'Meara are recurring references by both authors to the two-cities theme; by Augustine as inventor of the concept and by Toynbee with his "fondness for ending sections of his work with a flourishing reference to the *City of God*." (p. 161).

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