

# University of Hong Kong European Studies Series in Philosophical Theology

If the defining feature of the Middle Ages is its churches, the defining architect of its mind, heart and soul—at least until Aquinas—is St Augustine. The Church was a spiritual army whose leaders were its fathers. And in that sense his thought is closer in modern terms to a revolutionary like Lenin than to a philosopher's. For a philosopher may well be part of a broad movement, but his appeal is usually to first principles rather than to a body of faith, even if once philosophies are entrenched very questionable first principles (consider the naturalistic assumptions of so much analytical philosophy today) easily becomes matters of faith and the collection of philosophers members of a kind of Church.

In this volume we have brought together essays, which discuss Augustine's core ideas in a context that could hardly be more different than when he wrote, and essays which show his enduring philosophical and theological impact and relevance. The planetary scope of that extent can be gauged by inclusion of essays which discuss his ideas in relationship to the Australian poet Francis Webb, to the Mexican muralist José Orozco, to the reworking of his ideas by the Austrian émigré political scientist, Eric Voegelin, to the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion, and to the extremely interesting and highly personalized account of how (deformed) versions of his ideas formed the presumptions for Dixon Wong, a Hong Kong scholar working on Japanese business. These papers not only reflect the geographical reach of Augustine's relevance, but a social and existential scope that spans the arts, politics, philosophy, and business—all from a deep religious faith.



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ISBN 9781921511738



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# St Augustine:

His Relevance and Legacy

Edited Wayne Cristaudo and  
Heung Wah Wong



Adelaide  
2010

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First printed February 2010

Published by ATF Press



An imprint of the Australasian Theological Forum Ltd

PO Box 504

Hindmarsh SA 5007

Australia

ABN 90 116 359 963

[www.atfpress.com](http://www.atfpress.com)

Cover design: Astrid Sengkey

Layout: Carolyn Slater

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**Preface  
to the Series  
University of Hong Kong  
European Studies Series in  
Philosophical Theology**

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This is the second volume in the series European Studies in Philosophical Theology a joint project between ATF Press and Hong Kong University. The first appeared in 2006 and was entitled *Messianism, Apocalypse and Redemption in 20<sup>th</sup> Century German Thought* and was edited by Wayne Cristaudo and Wendy Baker. That volume was based on papers presented at a conference/workshop in Adelaide, South Australia. Since then the conference/workshops which provide an intense and stimulating environment for prospective authors to try out their papers has moved to the University of Hong Kong where they have been run by the School of Modern Languages and Cultures.

This volume came out of the first conference/workshop run by the School. It must be said that without my co-editor's (Heung Wah Wong) skills in financial and personal manage-

ment this series would not exist in this form, and certainly not in the range and scope and nature that it does now.

Hong Kong may seem an unusual place to base a series in philosophical theology, even stranger if we take into account that the University of Hong Kong is a completely secular institution. Yet it is an institution which aspires to create relevant and pioneering work. Again, one may well question whether a series devoted to philosophical theology is pioneering. The field is an old and broad one. But we believe that this series is not primarily for believers, but for those who are interested in the socio-cultural forces that have formed the ages. In this respect, to deny the significance of philosophical theology in the formation of European based institutions and cultures is sheer prejudice, and not one likely to be made about the role of Islam in the Arab world, or Confucianism in China, or Hinduism in India. Furthermore, it is simply stating the obvious to say that the world today is one in which all manner of historical and cultural forces are flowing around the globe and that we all need to be attuned to the range and nature of those forces. This series is intended as a small contribution to the process.

Further, our location has also given the series an unusual stamp. The volumes are all to be translated into Chinese, and that is why we have included as an Afterword, Martin Chung's small essay about Augustine's relevance to China. All the volumes in the series will be accompanied by such an essay. We hope that this series is not only acquainting people from the West with ideas from their

tradition, but that the series will also introduce ideas into China which will help the dialogue that is now a historical necessity.





## **Introduction**

**Wayne Cristaudo**

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If the defining feature of the Middle Ages is its churches, the defining architect of its mind, heart and soul—at least until Aquinas—is St Augustine. The Church was a spiritual army whose leaders were its fathers. And in that sense his thought is closer in modern terms to a revolutionary like Lenin than to a philosopher's. For a philosopher may well be part of a broad movement, but his appeal is usually to first principles rather than to a body of faith, even if once philosophies are entrenched very questionable first principles (consider the naturalistic assumptions of so much analytical philosophy today) easily becomes matters of faith and the collection of philosophers members of a kind of Church. One need only take Thomas Kuhn's insights into paradigms and paradigm shifts to concede this.

Augustine took little for granted and his decision to join the Church was the result of a long spiritual search requiring a serious coming to grips with, and disciplining of his own character. His faith was an informed faith. Likewise, when he deferred to earlier fathers he did so not because he wanted easy answers, or was intellectually lazy, but because he appreciated, somewhat like Edmund Burke did in another context, that wisdom requires time for its cultivation, and the wisdom of collective experience, or, more pertinently, of lives lived in sacrifice and suffering, that is of lives of love, is far more sturdy and real than the more elaborate and beguiling truths and syllogistic wisps of the reflective mind. While Augustine was often philosophical, he was very deliberately not a philosopher, because he wanted to be part of something and to build something much more powerful than philosophy could achieve. Thus works such as GR Evans' *Augustine on Evil* (to take a title which deals with a matter I discuss in this volume) which treat Augustine as a man whose head is full of philosophical puzzles tend to leave me somewhat cold because they usually downplay the life and death urgency of the commitment, which make it useless to compartmentalize the political, religious, and philosophical qualities of his thinking.<sup>1</sup> While Augustine is as philosophically capable as any philosopher of his or any age, he did not live a life so that he could stand before his God as a philosopher, but as a man, a man who was part of the one institution that superseded all philosophical schools which had sprang up in the ancient world, and which, unlike the Church, were incapable of building souls into a great body stretching across time.

To some extent, because philosophy has been so powerful in the modern world—communism is a thoroughly philosophical child, while liberalism, if not originating in philosophy is certainly perfected by philosophy (more specifically a philosophy of economics)—it is easy to overlook the key deficiency of philosophy which never touched the Church—its intellectual elitism. I do not at all intend to use the word ‘elitism’ in a pejorative sense as being bad in itself—one might well say that saints are a spiritual elite. I simply want to emphasize that philosophical schools are limited to those who are ‘clever’ enough to make disinterested reason, rather than their passions and social immersions, the axis of their being. That such creatures are very few indeed is, to a significant extent, why the ancient philosophical schools could never collect the common people like the Jewish and Christian faiths did. And one only needs to read Lucian (who was no friend of Christianity either) to see how socially useless ancient philosophy had become when Rome began its steep and lengthy dissolution.

It is difficult for most moderns who are not Church goers (and I think even for many that are) to appreciate the historical significance of the Church. But to put it quite bluntly, without the Church there would be no universal dream, or hope for, or faith in universal human solidarity and in a universal eternal peace. Of course one sees flickers of such a dream among the ancients and the natural law tradition as expressed, say, by Cicero, points in this direction. But, again, reason remains its axis and its limit. The Church did indeed require conversion, and hence rebirth of every soul. But such a rebirth was not based upon

the privileging of one human type, but rather of the retention, expansion and plasticity of human types—all ultimately uniquely called to respond to God in whichever station they found themselves.

The dream of universal solidarity finds all manner of modalities and secular expressions, from liberalism through to nationalism (originally, as is evident in the writings of Herder, a romantic idea which would enable all nations to contribute to a common peace) to socialism and communism. That these secular movements all grew up on Christian soil is hardly a lucky accident. For they grew up on soil where, in spite of all its wrongs and failures, the Church spoke to its faithful as members on a common voyage across the ages—that is the Church spoke in an Augustinian tongue. And Augustine's tongue had itself been formed and prepared by four hundred years of Christian devotion.

Of course, the Jewish people had originally spoken of one God who ruled all peoples and it was that God who had promised the Messiah and the age accompanying his arrival. The ancient world was one of countless gods, of countless hidden powers summoned by and promising their respective believers to deliver some gift or other—provided they were properly tended to and supplicated by their minions. But, amongst the ancients, the Jewish people were *the* people of faith. For they lived eternally on a *promise* of a time to come, forever reminded of their past transgressions, unworthiness, eternal suffering, *and* election.

While the Jewish people were held together in all their hope and suffering by the thread of that election, revealed

through their covenant, by the time of Augustine they did not see it as their task to convert the rest and bring all under the one body of faith. Perhaps to live eternally as an example, but not to bring all into the fold.<sup>2</sup> Christian mission and hence Augustine's mission was to bring all the peoples of the world into a common body which would integrate all men and women as descendants of the first man and as called by God, as the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, to live together toward the end of time. To this end he prayed incessantly, and he did all within his powers to steer the course around the various perils he saw laying in waiting for the Church in attempts by contemporaries to construct doctrines and dogmas which he was convinced would lead to spiritual disarray. And just as he did what he could do politically, he sought what he could from philosophy; he devoted his life to making comprehensible what he believed were the core components of the faith that God himself would nourish in order to fulfill His plan.

I doubt if any single person who is not a founder of a religious faith has had as much a hand in shaping a civilization as Augustine. In him the religious heart, political will and philosophical mind are perfectly integrated—as political as Lenin, as philosophical as Plato and as religious as Paul. When one reads of the doctrinal skirmishes and almost outright wars he was involved in one cannot but see how fragile and perilous the entire enterprise of the Church was. And when one sees how it is to him that Luther returns to clear away the encrustations of centuries of corruption from the Church, one can see that his architectural power reached even beyond the Middle Ages.

That his name is even invoked with philosophical seriousness in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries by political philosophers who find more contemporary understandings of the relationship between the soul and society somewhat shallow by comparison is indicative of the quality of his own soul and mind and their enduring relevance.

This volume is the second in the ATF series on Philosophical/ Theology—the first being *Messianism, Apocalypse, and Redemption: 20<sup>th</sup> Century German Thought*. I very much doubt whether any of the thinkers discussed in that work could ever have the impact Augustine did. In part, no doubt, that is because of the institutional diffuseness and complexity of our age in comparison with Augustine's. It is also to do with being connected with a body whose membership had already traversed several ages and is still extremely vital in some parts of the world and in some guises (consider, for example, the massive growth in Pentecostalism in Brazil—something I was not aware of until Matthew del Nevo, who is currently writing a book on Pentecostalism, drew to my attention).

If above I mention Augustine's political nous in the same breadth as Lenin's it was also in part to foreshadow the point that the social organism that has come out of modernity that can most closely be compared to the Church is the communist party. For that indeed was a body of believers dedicated to preparing for what the more scripturally minded instantly recognize as the messianic age. But while still active in China, its world shaping potency could not be sustained for a century. Someone who understands Augustine would readily understand why—the furrows of the Church ran into every nook of

the human soul, but the modern (and in this, as so much else, the post-modern never overleaps its paternity) has neither the faith nor patience, some might say the imagination, to conceive of a project so vast and demanding as what the Church demanded.

It was not only that Augustine became a member of this great power house of human history and human soul and world shaping, but he brought into it a particular assemblage of gifts which were driven by a faith that was as fierce as his will and intelligence. And what should, by the application of standards, principles or ideas about power which most contemporary academicians and journalists reach for to explain our present, past and future, have been a context signaling the end—the centre of power moving to the east, sackings by tribes, and the administrative and technical edifices of a civilization in disarray were but a beginning. That Augustine was an outsider both geographically and by temperament gave him the great gift of any genuine diagnostician, the distance from attachment to the decaying present and a deep sense of a better future. Of course, many might wish to dispute the value of certain aspects of Augustine's diagnosis, but rarely, I think, has the idea 'come the time come the man' been so apposite as in the case of St Augustine. I think it impossible to conceive that great time span we all crudely call the Middle Ages without the Church—which would not be wrongly classified as Augustine's Church.

In this volume we have brought together essays, which discuss Augustine's core ideas in a context that could hardly be more different than when he wrote, and essays which show his enduring philosophical and theological



impact and relevance. The planetary scope of that extent can be gauged by inclusion of essays which discuss his ideas in relationship to the Australian poet Francis Webb, to the Mexican muralist José Orozco, to the reworking of his ideas by the Austrian émigré political scientist, Eric Voegelin, to the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion, and to the extremely interesting and highly personalized account of how (deformed) versions of his ideas formed the presumptions for Dixon Wong, a Hong Kong scholar working on Japanese business. These papers not only reflect the geographical reach of Augustine's relevance, but a social and existential scope that spans the arts, politics, philosophy, and business—all from a deep religious faith. Once one acknowledges that Augustinian fruits were still flowering in the twentieth century and are doing so still today, I think nineteenth century announcements of God's death must be seen as somewhat analogous to the circulations of Mark Twain's death, which caused America's greatest humorist to gently remind his readers were somewhat exaggerated.

While I think the essays dealing explicitly with his theology and philosophy provide an excellent introduction into Augustine's thinking, this collection is not an attempt to say the last word on Augustine. And it is not driven by the kind of detailed philological or historical detailed analyses which would be appropriate for specialists. Rather it is an attempt to share something of the inspiration that Augustine's work has inspired and still inspires. And we hope to have conveyed why his work is full of the spirit of inspiration.

### Endnotes

1. GR Evans *Augustine on Evil*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
2. Anyone familiar with Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* will know that these are all points he has made with compelling incisiveness. Also see, for example, Hayim Halevy Donin *To be a Jew: A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life*, (New York: Basic Books, 1972).

