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AUGUSTINE ON ENVIRONMENT:
ABIDING IN THE TRANQUILITY OF ORDER

by

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,
Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Spirituality.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
Saint John's University
Collegeville, Minnesota

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This Paper was written under the direction of

Bernard F. Evans

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AUGUSTINE ON ENVIRONMENT:
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Description of the Project:

This paper turns primarily to Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions* and *City of God* as a resource for deeper Christian reflection on the nature of the relationship of human beings to the natural environment. Against the charge that classical Christian thought is bankrupt concerning any positive approaches to the environment, it seeks to offer a reading of Augustine that demonstrates his appropriateness and his potential contribution for a positive theological approach concerning fundamental attitudes towards the natural world. In the face of often ambiguous teaching about an authentically fruitful and positive Christian attitude toward the natural world, the interplay of Augustine's "methodology of conversion" and his conviction about the original and abiding goodness of creation offers contemporary Christians a positive model and starting point for further reflection upon environmental issues and questions.

This paper may be duplicated.

Edward Horski

Edward Horski

October 30, 1998

Date

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Bill Maciejewski of St. Cloud (November 16, 1964-July 6, 1998). Bill befriended nature and encouraged his friends to do the same.

This paper will investigate the meaning and significance of the thinking of St. Augustine (354-430 C.E.) concerning the question of the relationship of human beings and the natural world, i.e., the environment. It is an attempt to find something positive in classical Christian thinking that might help assist and form Christian reflection and action concerning the issues surrounding our environment today.¹ This paper will present Augustine as a classical Christian thinker who offers a reasonable, insightful and a sensible ecological stance toward the environment that is also decidedly God-directed. In short, he offers much to people of faith concerning the environmental issues that we face in contemporary life, helping us to appreciate nature without falling into nature worship. He offers us something by virtue of a “methodology of conversion.” (As we shall see, Augustine represents an encouraging model of openness to a new attitude and thinking about creation in the midst of human crisis.) He also offers us a sound teaching about the nature of creation in virtue of his emphasis on the inherent and irrevocable goodness of creation that issues forth from an all-good Creator. This doctrine of the impeccable goodness of creation encourages us to think in terms of an “ethical attitude toward the environment,” that is, as something inherently dignified and to be valued for its own sake. Augustine’s constant recollection of the goodness of creation does not gloss over the destruction that humans have often experienced in our encounter and relationship with and to nature.

¹ Lynn white, Jr., “the Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207. White, who is critical of Christian thought on the environment, writes: “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion . . . in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.” White argues that “destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. . . . To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West. For nearly 2 millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature” (1205, 1206). Cf., G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923):29-42. Chesterton argues “let anyone who knows a little Latin poetry recall suddenly what would have stood in the place of the sundial or the fountain, obscene and monstrous in the sun; and of what sort was the god of their gardens. Nothing could purge this obsession but a religion that was literally unearthly. . . . Whatever natural religion may have had to do with their beginnings, nothing but fields now inhabited those holy shrines. Pan was nothing but panic. Venus was

Augustine's thinking is balanced and takes into account the real, and often ambivalent, human experience of nature. In terms of our own modern attempts at thinking about nature, we can benefit from the interplay of Augustine's "methodology of conversion" with his conviction about the "ethical demands" of nature (as rooted in its impeccable generation from an absolutely good Creator) as it unfolds in his writings.

In order to put into context what he has to say about nature and creation, this essay will offer an apology, or explanation, of Augustine and then give an overview of his life; it will then look at some of his writings that demonstrate an essentially nature-affirming attitude, i.e., as inherently dignified and eschatologically destined for fulfillment; it will then draw some tentative conclusions about referring to Augustine's thought and writings as an authority for theological reflection on environmental issues. Our two principal sources are Augustine's *Confessions* and *City of God*.²

Re-Thinking Augustine

An apology seems in order so that Augustine's thinking about nature, and the human relationship to it, might be detached somewhat from, let us say, an "automatic dualistic" charge. Let us first get an overview of the tendency for which Augustine is often criticized.

Augustine's anthropology often emphasized a mind/body dualism that seemed, in turn, to automatically obscure anything positive he might have to say pertaining to matter and the created order. He often seemed to consider the realm of the spirit or mind as the height and the essence

nothing but venereal vice...Anyhow it was no good to preach natural religion to people to whom nature had grown as unnatural as any religion" 43-35.

² Augustine, *The City of God*, trans., Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, Inc, 1950):xi,xv. Merton writes that this particular book of Augustine's can be daunting: "Evidently, the treatment of the theme is so leisurely and meandering and so diffuse that the *City of God*, more than any other book, requires an introduction...*The City of God*, for those who can understand it, contains the secrets of life and death, war and peace, hell and heaven." See Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967):304. Brown says "This was no transitory pamphlet for a simple audience: it was a book which men of leisure, learned men, must be prepared to

of existence. For instance, Augustine can be found dialoguing with himself in the following fashion: “*Augustine*: ‘I desire to know God and the soul.’ *Reason*: ‘Nothing more?’ *Augustine*: ‘Absolutely nothing.’”³ This represents Augustine’s basic tendency to seek, evaluate and schematize reality from higher to lower, that is, in hierarchical fashion. Spiritual reality is often seen as exalted and situated at the top in Augustine’s thinking, while the material realm seems to get relegated to the bottom. In short, Augustine’s thinking often suggests the subordination of matter and creation under spiritual reality. A transcending tendency, wherein the seeming spiritualization of matter was the motion, never seems to have left Augustine entirely.⁴ Given this tendency of his thought and teaching, one might ask, then, how can Augustine have a modicum of positive insight to offer about the natural environment and our relationship to it?

Part of the answer is to temper our reaction to Augustine’s dualistic mindset, his seemingly nature-eclipsing tendencies. It is both possible and fruitful to refocus our estimation more on the fact of Augustine’s continual openness to conversion in his thinking rather than on his preference for things strictly spiritual. His tendency to dichotomize material and spiritual natures, subordinating material reality under spiritual, does not have to be the primary teaching we take from Augustine with regards to Christian reflection about the environment. His thinking was progressive and he did come to see nature as having a divine plan that resembles our notion of nature’s evolution toward some ultimate fulfillment. We may be, in fact, just as guilty of materializing the spiritual as Augustine was of spiritualizing the material. It makes sense to

read again and again to appreciate...a monument to the literary culture of the Late Empire.” See also Brown’s helpful schematization of the structure of *The City of God*, 303-304.

³ Augustine, *Soliloquies*, trans., Robert P. Russell (New York: Cosmopolitan Science & Art Service Co, Inc, 1943):1.2 .

⁴ Ibid. Santmire notes “Augustine seems never to have emerged from what Miles calls a “psychological dualism,” a certain existential alienationHe tends, at times, to turn away from the manifestations of God in the world around him to the self-disclosure of God in his inner self. In one of his earlier writings, he could say, “We must flee from every corporeal object...the metaphor of ascent seems to have exercised a continuing influence on his teaching (68&69).

realize that the road to a comprehensive understanding of the relationship of spiritual and material realms is narrow. Part of our present-day ecological crisis is due, at least in part, to the problematic inherent in even acknowledging the relationship let alone saying something meaningful about it. In a word, it is not as easy to comprehend the intricate relationship of the material world to the spiritual as we might presume. It is helpful, then, to readjust our focus to the fact that Augustine continually sought to understand and speak of the reality of that relationship in insightful and meaningful ways. (We will come back to this point later as he draws out the implications his understanding of that relationship in *The City of God*.)

At this point it is important to realize that the “spiritualizing” of creation that Augustine speculated about must be viewed as conceived against the foil of a future realization of it in God’s Kingdom, that is, creation as we know and experience it as provisional: both good in itself and destined for future glorification. (Such a mindset has similarities with our modern notions of the idea of evolution.) Augustine attempted to appreciate creation as it is, and also as it will be. In as much as creation is evolving to some abiding beautiful form, Augustine always saw its present beauty as a mysterious token of the promise of its future. This is not to say the creation as it stands and as it has evolved through the ages is bad in the strict sense of being evil; it is to suggest that it is provisional, as we experience it, and evolving to some mysterious fulfillment, the exact shape of which is difficult to ascertain. Consider what Augustine says in this passage:

...the eyes shall possess some quality similar to that of the mind, by which they may be able to discern spiritual things, and among these God—a supposition for which it is difficult or even impossible to find any support in Scripture—or, which is more easy to comprehend, God will be so known by us, and shall be so much before us, that we shall see Him by the spirit in ourselves, in one another, in Himself, in the new heavens and the new earth, in every created thing which shall then exist; and also by the body we shall see Him in every body which the keen vision of they of the spiritual body shall reach.⁵

⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, Inc., 1950):XXII.29. Cf. XII.3&XII.24.

In a sense, Augustine is offering something more than a baldly transcendent or “spiritualized” view of things material; it is more precise to say that he is giving us something more along the lines of what might be termed a “mystical view of creation.”

Another part of re-evaluating Augustine when it comes to the created order lies in reevaluating the presumption that Augustine in fact negates and sublimates the natural, created order. Augustine’s estimation of the beauty and goodness of creation must always be seen in terms of his understanding of protology and eschatology, that is to say, in terms of nature’s inherent dignity as rooted in God from the beginning of time to the end of time, as evolving toward a future recreation, fulfillment and glorification that is its hopefilled destiny. Augustine presents the inherent goodness of creation always against the foil of its future glorification and realization in God. As Santmire notes:

...Augustine’s development can be schematized as a movement from a radical dominance of his thought by the metaphor of ascent to a mutually reinforcing formation of his thought by the metaphor of fecundity and migration to a good land.

In Augustine’ theology, then, we witness a metaphorical metamorphosis of profound scope, which saw him move from radical adherence to the spiritual motif on the one hand, to a thoroughgoing adherence to the ecological motif on the other hand.⁶

A telling passage in contradistinction to the one Augustine avowed above, concerning his desire for “God and soul alone,” comes from his *Confessions*. He reconciles himself with the order, harmony and goodness of creation, and not over and against matter and nature:

I did not now long for better things, because I considered them all, and with sounder judgment I realized that while the things above were better than those below, all things together were better than those above would be by themselves.

There is no wholeness in those who are displeased with any part of your creation, no more than there was in me when I was displeased with so many things that You had made.⁷

⁶ Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*: 59-60. Santmire attempts to clarify ambiguous Christian teaching about the environment by pointing to three “root metaphors:” (1) the metaphor of ascent, (2) of fecundity and (3) of journey to a good land. When Santmire sees the metaphor of ascent operating in a given Christian thinker, he views this thinker as leaning towards a negative or transcending attitude towards the environment, i.e. as the “spiritual motif;” when he sees a thinker bringing together the metaphor of fecundity with that of the journey to a good land, he views the stance as a positive teaching concerning the environment, i.e., as the “ecological motif” (see p. 16).

⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Hal M. Helms (U.S: Paraclete Press, 1986): VII.13&14.

Augustine developed, reconsidered and changed his thinking about his estimation of the dignity of creation. He did not remain immersed in a dualistic cosmology that simply understood matter and the body as evil, and the spirit and the soul as the only ultimate good. He came to appreciate more fully the goodness of creation on its own merit. In spite of an inability to comprehend every reason behind seemingly insignificant or “lower” parts, Augustine came to see all of creation as God had created it, i.e., as good.⁸ “And you, O God, *saw everything that You had made, and behold, it was very good.* Yes, we also see the same, and behold all things are very good”⁹ (see, Gn. 1:24-25). In fact, he is coming to see that the diversity of creation, the fecundity of nature, is truly part of the design and will and blessing of the Creator: “how highly he prizes unity in multitude.”¹⁰ In the spirit of Psalm 46:9, Augustine can exhort: “Come behold the works of the Lord, what prodigies He hath wrought in the earth.”¹¹ We turn now to consider the context and content of Augustine’s life and his final conversion to Christianity. This will enable us to understand more fully what Augustine has to say about nature’s relationship to humanity, as is found in his writings, especially in his *City of God*.

A Working Portrait of Augustine

Augustine was born in 354 A.D. in Thagste, North Africa (modern Souk Ahras, in Algeria). He was educated in an age that was rapidly and dramatically changing, much as our own. He acquired a literary education that would enable him to be a lawyer or a teacher. The overall benefit of such an education and position was to make him a full citizen of a Roman

⁸ Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*. Santmire presents the notion of “concurus” in relationship to Augustine’s thinking on nature. He writes: “Augustine put forward an omnimiraculous view of nature. For him nature was intrinsically an open system, a field of wonder, from the least of the creatures to the greatest” (89).

⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*. XIII.28; cf., XII.28; cf., *The City of God*, XI.21.

¹⁰ Augustine, *The City of God*, XII.22.

¹¹ Quoted by Augustine, *The City of God*, XII.27.

town.¹² In the end, he became a schoolmaster. In short, Augustine was an ambitious young man from Africa seeking opportunities in the traditional society of the civilized men of Rome, not unlike his patron, Romanianus. However, his education would come to realize itself in quite a different context than what Augustine had envisioned: “All the ambitious young men of Thagaste will return to spend the rest of their lives in thoroughly provincial setting, as bishops of small African towns...as so often happens, the world on the edge of dissolution, had settled down to believe that it would last forever.”¹³ In fact, Augustine was undergoing his own personal disillusionment. Augustine, it seems, was destined to become a churchman.

Augustine was not unacquainted with Christianity (his mother, Monica, herself a Christian, had him enrolled as a child in the catechumenate). Augustine was, nevertheless, unimpressed with its seemingly unlearned logic, coarse literary style and the anthropomorphism of its Sacred Scriptures.¹⁴ He would say “when I understood the scriptures literally, they killed me spiritually.”¹⁵ Instead of Christian doctrine, Augustine pinned his hopes for a comprehensive understanding of reality on the dualistic logic and myths of Manichaeism. Essentially a Gnostic religion, the Manichae understood good and evil as two opposing forces that governed and explained all of reality.¹⁶ The Manichean cosmology portrayed a good divinity that suffered passively before the machinations of an opposing evil divinity; this notion accounted for all that was perceived along the lines of “good” and “bad” in human experience. It was a comprehensive explanation for the reality of good and evil in the world. Augustine was attracted by this comprehensive theoretical explanation for the human experience of good and evil. However, after nearly ten years with the Manicheans, Augustine became dissatisfied with their

¹² See Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967):21-27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, III.5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, V.14.

account of reality and grew weary, it would seem, of waiting for a secret revelation or illumination that was never received. When the Manichean Bishop Faustus failed personally to satisfy Augustine's inquiries during an audience, he abandoned this way of thinking.¹⁷

Consequently, Augustine would end up in Milan as a professor. It is in Milan, partially through the Neo-Platonic thinking of Bishop Ambrose of Milan, that he was enabled to be definitively delivered from Manichean theories of materialistic dualism to the otherworldly emphasis of Plotinus and Porphyry. This happened around the year 386.

The Neo-Platonic thinking of Ambrose opened up a new vision of reality for Augustine that allowed him to interpret the scriptures in a spiritual or allegorical manner, to understand God and humans in a more spiritual aspect,¹⁸ and to experience a spiritual/mystical center of being within himself.¹⁹ This conversion culminates and is characterized by the influence of St. Paul's writings on Augustine's life and thought. As he read Romans 13:13-14, all doubt about Christ and Christianity left him.²⁰ As a result, to be brief, Augustine abandoned his teaching career and proposed marriage and was baptized in the year 387 as an adult Christian.

The next four years of his life found him retiring with friends to try and live a monastic lifestyle, apparently owing to the introverting influence of Neo-Platonism. However, in 391, he visited Hippo in order to see about founding a monastery there. He was conscripted, as often happened in that time of church history to educated, converted Christian men, and ordained a priest by Bishop Valerius of Hippo; in 395 he is consecrated bishop and so replaced Valerius who died. His life and thinking, from this point onward, continued to turn more and more to the active and practical concerns of the people and the issues of the world about him. As Brown

¹⁶ See, Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston:Beacon Press, 1963).

¹⁷ *Confessions*, V.6-V.7&V.14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, VII.1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* VII.9-10.

notes: “Always susceptible to ‘atmosphere,’ Augustine was, yet again, changing his mode of life.”²¹ He served as Bishop of Hippo the rest of his life, through the barbarian attacks of 410 and 429, the continued struggles against Manicheanism (and similar teachings of the Priscillinaists and the Marcionites) the conflicts of the Donatists and Pelagianism, a resurgence of Neo-Paganism as well as an influx of disheartened Christian refugees coming to Hippo in the wake of a crumbling Roman social order. Augustine died on August 28 (also his feast day) in 430.

Augustine’s Writings

Augustine’s *City of God* will provide a more specific focus concerning his thoughts about nature.

Augustine wrote *The City of God* between 413 and 427. When it comes to investigating this work as a resource for Christian thinking about the environment, we immediately run into a far different context than that of our own day. As Santmire puts it plainly, “Augustine’s concern was with the collapse of Rome, not of ecological systems.”²² In the *City of God*, Augustine is recapitulating, in the classical Roman literary style, the foundations of two distinct histories, that of the city of humans (*civitas terrena*) and of the city of God (*civitas Dei*). Augustine’s mind was fixed, in the waning years of his life and in the late days of the Roman Empire, on the juxtaposition of two realms and two loves:

Accordingly two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by love of the self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former in a word, glories in itself, the later in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience.²³

²⁰ Ibid. VII.12

²¹ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 134.

²² Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*, 237.

²³ Augustine, *The City of God*, Xvi.28. Ibid. Cf., XII.27, XIV.4, XV.3, XV.22 and Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, XI.15.

As Brown writes: “the *City of God*, itself, is not a ‘tract of the times;’ it is the careful and premeditated working out, by an old man, of a mounting obsession...a definitive rejection of the paganism of an aristocracy that had claimed to dominate the intellectual life of their age.”²⁴

An awareness and respect for the context and intention of this work is essential; however, what Augustine does have to say, particularly in *The City of God*, can yield positive teachings and insights for a better contemporary Christian understanding about the environment and our relationship to it. We need to reorient our thinking about the order of concern of our relationship to our environment (the ecological crisis and the hyper-anthropocentric charge of White) and since Augustine underwent an intellectual conversion prior to a moral one, his person and his teachings can provide a solid example for us. In light of the environmental crisis and ambiguous Christian teaching concerning our relationship to it, we, too, need to reconsider our own intellectual histories and presumptions when it comes to our thoughts about the environment.²⁵ This appears to be a reasonable method of proceeding rightly and intelligently so as to adjust our actions in regards to nature. We need to convert our basic thinking with regards to the environment and our place in and with it. Furthermore, there are metaphorical similarities and parallels between Augustine’s age and our own. He recorded a God-directed response to the catastrophic events of his day from which we can also learn.²⁶ A comprehensive shift, acceptance or rejection, of one category of thought over another, i.e., an “intellectual conversion,” may be an anachronism given our historical context of plurality. We cannot

²⁴ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 312&302.

²⁵ *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Gordon S. Wakefield (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983):33. “What is certain is that Augustinian spirituality always includes an intellectual element.”

²⁶ Jaraslov Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the triumph of the Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987). What I have in mind are some connections with the “Decline and Fall of Rome” as paradigmatic of consequent cataclysms, including our own potential environmental crisis, through the ages. This seems to be the major point of Pelikan’s book, as he writes “...the unavoidable consideration of the ambiguity in the very question of “triumph and tragedy,” may perhaps stand as a fitting recognition of the permanent value in the paradigm of the “fall of Rome” (12).

presume that Augustine will, or even can, provide a comprehensive, systematic or structural model for solving our contemporary crisis of environmental conundrums. However, we do need at least an “intelligent conversion” when it comes to our thinking on the environment within an urgent world context.

Because of the interplay of Augustine’s openness to conversion with the conviction of the inherent goodness of creation, his teaching can prove valuable to us. Our times and our particular responses to the urgency of the environmental crisis can find resonance with the unique response of Augustine in the *City of God*. He calls us to the need for conversion (*metanoia*) and openness about our current presumptions about the environment, and strongly reminds us of the inherent dignity and goodness of all of creation that demands a mature and intelligent response. Augustine saw and felt the risks and challenges of his time in a very human fashion. He responded accordingly. As Brown notes:

...there is room in Augustine’s mind for all the confused emotions of any contemporary, who feels obscurely that the world he lives in can no longer be taken for granted...What was [is] at stake...was [is] the capacity of men to ‘long’ for something different, to examine the nature of their relationship with their immediate environment; above all, to establish their identity by refusing to be engulfed in the unthinking habits of their fellows.²⁷

On the one hand, we must necessarily acknowledge the context and content of this work: profound changes and dissolution of a social order and the Christian attempt to argue, in terms of the culture, for the in-breaking of God into history, even as Rome was invaded. On the other hand, we can resonate with Augustine’s hope and apprehension of potential for a positive future, and not so much in the sense of ascending the heights, but in the sense of God working in history, including the history of the environment and insights into our relationship with it.²⁸ In a

²⁷ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 290, 304&332.

²⁸ Augustine speculates about the future character of the Heavenly Jerusalem through the tradition and spirit of the psalms, and not the often terrific, apocalyptic vision of the end of times found in the Gospels. See his *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*.

word, Augustine's life and teaching personifies possible responses to "crisis" that can lead to deep and meaningful reorientations, that is, to a fruitful conversion of heart and mind concerning a positive Christian approach to our environment.

Common Threads

We can note and benefit from interesting and potentially meaningful parallels between Augustine's age and our own. One such similarity is a God-generated and God-centered hope in the future. Augustine's thought and hope rested on the future of the world in God's loving plan, which has resonance with our own notions of "progress" as a model cosmology:

The education of the human race, represented by the people of God, has advanced, like that of an individual, through certain epochs, or, as it were, ages, so that it might gradually rise from earthly to heavenly things, and from the visible to the invisible. This object was kept so clearly in view, that, even in the period when temporal rewards were promised, the one God was presented as the object of worship, that men might not acknowledge any other than the true Creator and Lord of the spirit, even in connection with the earthly blessings of this transitory world. For he that denies all things, which either angels or men can give us, are in the hand of the one Almighty, is a madman.²⁹

As Brown notes: "...life itself was presented as a gradual and painful adjustment to a miraculous new growth that could happen in the midst of the horror of old age."³⁰ It bears reemphasizing that Augustine's discussion of nature and environment occurs in the context, and always refers to God as Creator and as the point to which creation culminates, ideally and eschatologically in the City of God. Thus, his thinking is essentially theocentric and his hope is orientated toward future fulfillment, in God's terms, which are largely invisible at present³¹, though not indiscernible in part in the blessings already given through the gift of creation.³² This means that Augustine does not simply view creation as bad in itself. However, at the same time, neither does he equate creation with the essence of divinity, avoiding any tendency towards pantheism or nature

²⁹ Augustine, *The City of God*, X.14.

³⁰ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 297.

³¹ See *the City of God*, X.12&XII.23.

worship. More precisely, creation is not fully completed. Creation is not a “gag-gift,” like receiving a useless trinket in a fancy wrapper, to be tossed in the ditch when no one is looking. For Augustine, all of nature is wonderfully wrapped in intimations of the fullness of God’s wonders and full of infinite surprises that serve as the tokens of God’s creative goodness and promise. Much as in our own day, Augustine had to make sense of suffering and the collapse of systems on very comprehensive and complex levels.³³ In Augustine’s day, that meant the context, impact and ramifications of the collapse of Rome, in ours it is the context, impact and ramifications of the potential collapse of our environment. One question might be asked, then, is this: How can Augustine help us to find where God is working in our own context of crisis, the context of severe environmental stress and tribulation?

A Central Theme

In order to address the above question directly, I would like to focus on one more specific aspect of Augustine’s thought in the *City of God* that can offer a positive influence to contemporary Christian thought about creation, since it deals with the present state of our relationship to the rest of creation. As Augustine writes: “I speak only of this life which we know, and which we now are. [Who] can describe the tokens of God’s goodness that are extended to the human race even in this life?”³⁴ His is an empirical approach. As such, he encourages us to find the answers by looking reflectively at our experience of life. A major contribution that Augustine can make to a better understanding of the abiding concern for our relationship to the rest of creation centers around a notion of the autonomy or dignity of nature,

³² Ibid. XXII.24&29.

³³ See Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, 136.9. See also, Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 292-294. Augustine used the image of the “olive press” to assess the meaning of crisis and catastrophe for those under his care. Brown writes that “The disasters of the time were the *pressurae mundi*, the pressing of the whole human community. No one could be exempt from such pressing” (ibid. 293). It would seem that this metaphor of the “olive press” could also have potential resonance with the ecological crisis of our time.

³⁴ Augustine, *The City of God*, XII.22; cf., XII.24.

i.e., the idea that creation is not fallen or perverted even though human beings are in terms of our freedom to choose the good.

On the one hand, as Augustine is ready to dramatically point out, human experience of nature itself offers us no answer as to its inner value of fundamental dignity. Augustine takes the profoundly ambivalent experience of our relationship to nature seriously. He writes:

What man can go out of his house without being exposed on all sides to unforeseen accidents? Returning home sound in limb, he slips on his own door-step, breaks his leg, and never recovers. What can seem safer than a man sitting in a chair? Eli the priest fell from his, and broke his neck. How many accidents do farmers, or rather all men, fear that crops may suffer from weather, or the soil, or the ravages of destructive animals? Commonly they feel safe when the crops are gathered and housed. Yet, to my certain knowledge, sudden floods have driven the laborers away, and swept the barns clean of the finest harvest.³⁵

There is a subtle ambiguity or ambivalence at work between human experience of creation and creation itself that makes our judgment about the relationship tainted or biased. In other words, our experience of creation, often knocking at our precarious existence as it does, naturally causes us to have an anthropocentric concern or bias when considering nature. We become more concerned about our own comfort and continued survival than what the environment may be undergoing at our hands. Our experience of creation makes us somewhat ambivalent with regard to it. Creation is both a blessing and a curse in our histories, myths and experience, setting up an epic drama of sorts. (Think of *Moby Dick* as an example.) Our environment enhances and sustains human life, but it can also reek havoc upon and take away the same human life. Theoretically then, as Augustine points out above, our relationship to creation is tinged with the bias of self-concern.

~~Augustine is aware of the danger of judging creation from this biased, self-loving~~
perspective, even given the worst case scenarios, as non-valuable or bad in itself. Neither does he spiritualize or deify creation, but attempts to think of it for its created and God-given reality

and as an objective empirical fact. Forgetting the blinding, unthinking presumptions of self-concern, what might be called the “survival instinct,” we either fail to remember that we cannot apprehend the mysterious organic portrait of creation, of which we are a part, or we forget that God created all of the natural order as good.

According to Augustine, nature acquires its intrinsic value and dignity, not in virtue of its own inherent mystery, but in light of being created by a good Creator and in constant reference to the Creator from beginning through to the end of time, irrespective of human experience and judgment. Consider the following passage:

...beauty does not strike us, because by our mortal frailty we are so involved in part of it, that we cannot perceive the whole, in which these fragments that offend us are harmonized with the most accurate fitness and beauty. And therefore where we are not so well able to perceive the wisdom of the Creator, we are very properly enjoined to believe it, lest in the vanity of human rashness we presume to find fault with the work of so great an Artificer...the natures themselves displease men, as often happens when they become hurtful to them, and then men estimate them not by their nature, but by their utility; as in the case of those animals whose swarms scourged the Egyptians. But in this way of estimating, they may find fault with the sun itself; for certain criminals or debtors are sentenced by the judges to be set in the sun. Therefore it is not with respect to our convenience or discomfort, but with respect to their own nature, that the creatures are glorifying to their Artificer...For [human beings] wish to see [by the light of the fire], but not be burnt. But they forget that this very light which is so pleasant to them, disagrees with and hurts weak eyes; and in that heat which is disagreeable to them, some animals find the most suitable conditions for healthy life.

All natures, then, inasmuch as they are, and have therefore a rank and a species of their own, and a kind of internal harmony, are certainly good.³⁶

Augustine’s view of creation in relationship relies not so much on biased human self-concern and testimony, which is ambivalent and wedded to self-interest, but rather on the presupposition that the Creator of creation is good and therefore created a good creation in totality regardless of human experience and judgement. We may not see this because of our lack of objective distance and our consideration of nature based in utility, rather than in its essence. Again, Augustine teaches:

³⁵ Ibid. XII.22; cf., XII.23.

For what else is to be understood by that invariable refrain, “And God saw that it was good,” than the approval of the work in its design, which is the wisdom of God...there is only one source of all things, and that no nature which is not divine can exist unless originated by that Creator...accept with a good and simple faith this so good and simple a reason of the world’s creation, that a good God made it good.³⁷

God has made creation good, “which is the wisdom of God.” This means that we may not always have an insight as to how certain aspects of creation are in fact good, but we can be sure they are because a good God made them. This is the foundation Augustine puts forth as a basis for respecting the inherent dignity of creation. In short, creation has an inherent dignity, set in stone, if you will, by the mysterious order and design of the one who created creation.

By extension, then, we may say with Augustine that not only is God incomprehensible, but so is God’s handiwork that shows forth the mysterious hiddenness of God through God’s creativity.³⁸ However, although nature mediates and reflects God’s goodness and mystery, creation is not God. For Christian’s this avoids any fear we might have of exalting nature to divine status in a pantheistic mood. Even in this aspect, creation’s autonomy is not only separated and appreciated apart from human beings, but it is distinguished from God, the Creator, and therefore definitively allowed a goodness of its own accord: “He governs all things in such manner as to allow them to perform and exercise their own proper movements. For although they can be nothing without him, they are not what He is.”³⁹ God is God; creation is creation. The world becomes a standing miracle, foreshadowing the wonderful fullness of creation in the future.⁴⁰ The corruption of created nature is not its nature, since nature is created by a good God; corruption comes from the perversion or abuse of nature, and carries with it its

³⁶ Ibid. XII.4-5; cf., XIV.4, XIX.13 &XXII.24.

³⁷ Ibid. XI.21&23; cf., *Confessions*, XIII.28.

³⁸ Ibid. Cf., X.12, XI.24&XII.24.

³⁹ Ibid. VII.30.

⁴⁰ Ibid. Cf., X.12&XII.23

own punishment.⁴¹ As if to press the dignity and integrity of the inherent goodness of the created order to an extreme, Augustine even teaches that the most malicious of natures is naturally to be considered good:

There is a nature [God] in which evil does not or even cannot exist; but there cannot be a nature in which there is no good. Hence not even the nature of the devil himself is evil, in so far as it is nature, but it was made evil by being perverted. Thus he did not abide in the truth, but could not escape the judgement of the Truth; he did not abide in the tranquillity of order, but did not therefore escape the power of the Ordainer. The good imparted by God to this nature did not screen him from the justice of God by which order was preserved in his punishment; neither did God punish the good which he had created, but the evil which the devil had committed.⁴²

Conclusion

This essay investigated Augustine's context, character and some of his thought to see what he has to offer in the way of reflecting on a contemporary Christian understanding and appreciation of our relationship to the rest of the environment. Certainly, his thinking is directly related to his conversion history, which bears strong marks of an intellectual content and emphasis and is also born of a crisis-ridden environment. I tried to present this, along with the crisis context of both Augustine's day and our own, as a metaphorical (and even paradigmatic) virtue. We, too, need a sort of fundamental shift in our thinking about our relationship to the rest of the environment, and it is a need felt within a similarly crisis-like and urgent context not unlike that of Augustine's. We need to think about our relationship with nature in terms that represent a position somewhere between the denigration and total denial of the dignity and rights of nature on the one hand, and a spiritualization of creation (pantheism) that stands outside the context of the Christian tradition on the other. This does not imply any necessity for radical shifts to distinct and comprehensive schools of thought or methodologies such as Augustine himself underwent, e.g., from Manicheanism to Platonism; but, it can provide a valuable

⁴¹ Ibid. Cf., XII.3, XIV.3&XV.22.

example and teaching for openness and self-criticism of our own anthropocentric assumptions in our theological reflections about the environment. This adds an empirical or objective asset for appealing to Augustine about the environment and human relationship to it.

It remains true, however, that Augustine's teaching provides us with no systematic treatment of our relationship to the environment that we might label "Augustinian Environmental Theology." Augustine's teachings can help us with an intelligent conversation about the environment more than an intellectual conversion about certain issues. We are in need of intelligent conversation and conversion on the question of our relationship to the rest of creation; we must be open to thinking differently about our theological presumptions about the value of nature. On Augustine's view, nature is distinct and dignified quite apart from any utility or discomfort to us. Our situation within creation must be viewed and evaluated within the perspective of the whole organic and theological framework, as far as we are able to comprehend this. (For Augustine existence and creation are barely comprehensible in themselves because of an appreciation of and abiding, pervasive mysterious ground that underlies all of reality, namely, God. Creation is fundamentally a token or manifestation of God's mystery and thus not totally open to human comprehension. This suggests that a certain "mystical environmental theology" is implicit in Augustine's thought.) We can conclude that Augustine truly does perceive and reasonably present the notion that creation possesses an inherent dignity grounded in the goodness of a good God that cannot be easily ignored and never dispensed with. We can see the Platonic influence that animates and gives structure to his teaching, informing his faith with the ~~apprehension of the overflowing-goodness of a good God.~~ Santmire agrees essentially with such an evaluation of Augustine who represents an "omnimiraculous appreciation of the whole of

⁴² Ibid. XIX.13; on perversion belonging to the order of "the will" or "volition" and not to the nature of creation, which is good by virtue of being created good by a good creator, see *The City of God*, XII.3, XIV.3&XV.22.

natural and human history.”⁴³ Augustine’s historical understanding is theocentric and orientated towards the fulfillment of creation in the future Kingdom of God.

There is little reason to believe that Augustine’s thought, as could be feared, leaves nature and our environment out of the beatific vision as such. He simply intimates a glorified created order as yet unexperienced and difficult to imagine in its beauty and functioning. Augustine, without overlooking the eschatological aspects of faith, speculates as best he can about what the fulfillment of all of creation might entail. Thus, he teaches us to value creation in and of itself and also encourages to see its present beauty and order as the mysterious, provisional prefiguration of a glorious created fulfillment yet to come.⁴⁴ We cannot yet see the entire hidden beauty and perfectly appropriate harmony of the whole, created order as God does. However, this give us no license to denigrate and demoralize creation as it is because God has made it good as it is and on its way to glorification.⁴⁵

Since there is at least a little dualistic tendency inherited by most modern people⁴⁶, that is, valuing the spiritual over and against the material, we can learn from Augustine’s personal example and his teaching about how to struggle and grow in order to change our thinking on our abiding relationship and common destiny with the changeable, ambiguously experienced created order, and the unshakable certainty of faith in an all-good Creator God. In both his life and his teaching, he directly challenges us against thinking that we are, or even have, the ultimate reference point when it comes to concerns about the whole of creation. Creation glorifies God in its very nature. We are part of a mystery-whole that in itself manifests God’s mysterious

⁴³ Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*, 63. He also writes, “With the coming of the mysterious end time of God, the whole biophysical world will be glorified. It will be visibly transparent to the luminescent presence of God. God will be all in all, not just spiritual creation, but through the whole world of nature as well” (65). Cf., *The City of God*, XX.16&XXII.29.

⁴⁴ *The City of God*, Cf., XI.22, XII.24, XII.4-5. Cf., *Confessions*, XIII.28.

⁴⁵ Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*, 59. He notes about Augustine: “It is not the world-transcending logic of the good that was temporalized. It was the world-affirming logic of goodness.”

invisible activity. We must, at the very least, be cautious in making judgments and decisions about the environment around us.

One final evaluation. Augustine affirms the intrinsic goodness and dignity of creation, based on the Creator being an Artificer of good natures, and so can serve as a coach for our own thinking on our relationship with all of creation. Augustine's collective vision of all of history includes the history of all of the created order. He challenges us to bring spirituality (mysticism?) and Christian ethics to bear on our relationship with creation. In this regard, key concepts are dispersed throughout his writings. His affirmation and articulation of the Christian teaching of the goodness of creation challenges Christians to develop an ethical consciousness and an intelligent approach for its good care and enjoyment. What one will not find when turning to Augustine on this score is any elaboration on the intricacies of a comprehensive system of Christian environmental thought in which the necessary terms are clearly defined. What Augustine reaffirms for us is that all of creation is good as profoundly distinct from us and irrespective of our negative experiences of it. The material order has its own inherent dignity, which is grounded in the belief that a good God created it. It would follow that nature thus possesses certain inherent rights, if you will, that require an ethical response from human beings. Furthermore if a Creator were going to be appealed to in the consideration of the environment, our traditional belief in and about God, Augustine would have us consider nature first in connection with God's purposes. Augustine also teaches that God made creation to glorify God's self. This implies that our right to the environment is neither exclusive nor absolute but is limited. Nature demands justice from the human race. In short, Augustine can be recommended, even in the more popular *Confessions* and *The City of God*, as a Christian

⁴⁶ See Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, "Epilogue: Gnosticism, Nihilism and Existentialism," 320-340.

resource for theological thought, and likewise for potential inspiration and action concerning the relationship of human beings to the rest of creation.

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