

St. Augustine as an Educator

DONALD ELCOAT

ST. AUGUSTINE lived in an age not unlike our own in many ways. Just as we have seen the eclipse of the old colonial powers of the West, so he saw the might of Rome crumble before the onslaughts of Goth and Vandal. Like ours, his was an age in which old values were being questioned and new solutions tried. Despite one or two blind spots from which he suffered, it is no exaggeration to say that, in every subject to which he turned his mind, he out-thought his contemporaries. He devastated the pagans in his critique of the old classical ideals. He gave no quarter in his attacks on humanistic thinking in the church. Like all great thinkers, he was at the same time a child of his age, yet standing outside and above his generation in his grasp of eternal truth.

His influence upon Western thought has been incalculable. In his teaching on the church and the sacraments, he is looked upon as a Father of the Roman Catholic Church. In his doctrines of Man and Grace he inspired the Protestant Reformers. His philosophical writings still exert a lively influence and his educational views played a formative role in the grammar school and university systems of the West long after the middle ages had waned. Indeed a prominent twentieth-century educationist once remarked that all educational philosophies fell into two classes, which could be typified by St. Augustine and Rousseau respectively.¹ To those readers who know only the Augustine of *The Confessions* or *The City of God* or who have heard rumours of his harsh treatment of Pelagius, it may come as a surprise to learn, not only that he was one of the greatest teachers the Christian Church has ever produced, but that the principle of his teaching was 'love'.

The influence of Augustine's home

IN his work as a Christian educator, Augustine was the heir to a tradition. From as early as AD 96, the expression 'en Christo paedieia'

(education in Christ) was heard, first used by Clement of Rome. At first such Christian education was carried on in the home and in the church, there being no demand that Christians should found their own schools distinct from those of the pagans. Indeed Augustine, in common with all the early church Fathers, received his education at the hands of non-Christian teachers. The home was held to be the most important agency of Christian training. Following the exhortation of St. Paul,³ 'every Church Father felt himself compelled to write about, or touch upon, the problem of the right upbringing of children'.⁴ Although Augustine wrote no formal treatise on the subject, his writings abound in references to children. He alludes frequently to his own upbringing, especially to the influence of his mother Monica, even though by the time he learned to appreciate them, it was, as is so often the case, too late to make his parents any tangible return.

To them he owed the sound, if uninspired, at times even brutal, classical education he received, albeit that their motives were mixed, his father Patricius wanting him to succeed in a profession, whereas Monica, sharing this ambition, also hoped it might lead him to become a Christian. (It seems by this period that a liberal education contained at least some consideration of the Christian Scriptures.) If, as psychologists claim, the home is the most formative influence in a child's development, we can see in the conflicting loyalties of Augustine's early background those forces which made him restless until he found his rest in God.

Augustine's schooling

IN the tradition of Roman education, Monica would teach her son at home, until he was of an age to attend the elementary school, under the direction of the euphemistically-named *ludi magister*, 'master of play'. It was anything but play for young Aurelius. He tells us in his *Confessions* that the first prayer he could remember from his boyhood ran, 'O God, please don't let me get a thrashing at school today'.⁴ He comments ironically that the idleness of the adults who punished him for wanting to play was regarded by them as serious business!

Having completed his elementary education, Augustine was sent to the grammar school at Madaura, a neighbouring town in the old province of Numidia, because his home town Thagaste (the modern Souk Ahras in Algeria) did not boast one. This was a private establishment directed by a *grammaticus*. Here he began the study of Latin and Greek literature in the customary manner of reading aloud and listening to the master's explanation of grammatical points, followed by rote-learning. Here he learned those principles of textual criticism that he was later to employ in his biblical expositions. He was afterwards to bewail the fact that he learned to weep for the death of Dido

but not for his own death in sin!⁵

Having wasted a year in idleness, marred in his eyes by the commission of petty acts of teenage vandalism, he went at the age of seventeen, sufficient funds having been raised for the purpose, to the School of Rhetoric in Carthage. Here in the semi-Christian atmosphere of the provincial capital, he spent his time, like the average student the world over, in serious study punctuated by the occasional prank. From then on, had it not been for his dramatic conversion to Christianity in Milan, he might have pursued his chosen ambition to become a Professor of Rhetoric. In fact, he had already embarked on this career and was quickly gaining promotion in Carthage, Rome and Milan, when he suddenly accepted Christian baptism and ordination to the priesthood, followed by rapid elevation to the episcopate. The rest of his life was spent in preaching, teaching, administration, pastoral work and writing in and around Hippo Regius, right up to the time he lay dying there, as the Vandals were knocking on the gates of the town.

Augustine as a teacher

IT has been said that 'the views of St. Augustine on the instruction of Christians are inseparable from his views on all the great topics to which he turned a mind both richly diversified and singularly unified'.⁶ Nevertheless, for practical purposes, we must limit our consideration to his specifically educational writings. We shall be disappointed if we expect to be able to turn to Augustine and find a fully articulated philosophy of education and a technical guide to its implementation. His idea of education was at once deeper and yet narrower than the concepts which prevail today. Deeper in that the eschatological dimension was never far from his mind; he was educating souls for eternity. Narrower in that he never addressed himself to the school situation as such; he was more concerned with the work of the Christian pastor or tutor, rather than of the class teacher.

The treatises in which his educational views are most clearly set out are his *De catechizandis rudibus* (On catechising the uninstructed), written about AD 405 at the request of a deacon Deogratias, who had asked for some guidance in the art of instructing candidates for baptism, and the four books of the *De doctrina Christiana* (On Christian doctrine), a maturer work composed over a period of thirty years from AD 397. (The suggestive title *De Magistro*, On the Teacher, AD 389, conceals an early philosophical work in which he expounded a theory of language and attempted to assimilate a Platonic theory of ideas to the Christian revelation.)

The first work testifies to the conviction of the early church that the Christian Faith is a system of connected truths, and, as such, is a matter for teaching and learning, no less than any other kind of know-

ledge. St. Augustine would not have agreed with the modern notion that religion is caught not taught! The office of teacher, he thought, was as important to the Christian ministry as that of preacher or pastor. It is an art having its techniques which the Christian ministry ignores at its peril. If the pagan *grammaticus* can take seriously his task of initiating his pupils into literature, how much more should a teacher of eternal truth exercise care in instructing the beginner. Yet technique must never replace the human relationship between teacher and taught.

The treatise *On Christian Doctrine* was written under the conviction that the future of Christianity in North Africa, threatened by the attacks of pagans, heretics and schismatics, depended on the training of a well-educated clergy and laity who could meet them on their own ground. The first part, Books I to III, deals with *modus inveniendi quae intelligenda sunt*, that is the method of discovering what is necessary to be known, in other words, the rules for the correct interpretation of Scripture and the determination of how much secular learning is legitimate in furthering this aim. The second part, Book IV, covers *modus proferendi quae intellecta sunt*, that is the correct method of communicating the Scriptures once they have been understood by the teacher. The first part, therefore, deals with the intellectual preparation of the teacher; the second part, with his professional training.

Augustine's views on education

LET us attempt to summarise what he has to say in writings, which, on the face of it, seem to be nothing more than advice to Christian catechists and preachers in fifth-century North Africa. It is worth pointing out that, unlike some modern writers, he never advocates any method that he has not already tried out himself or is unwilling to demonstrate by means of model lessons. Indeed his own experience, both as pupil and teacher, informs all his writings on education. We learn, then:

1. Augustine believed that only an educated work-force of teachers could meet the pagans etc. on their own ground. It was no use hiding behind the pious notion of relying entirely on God. 'As to those who talk vauntingly of Divine Grace, and boast that they understand and can explain Scripture without the aid of such directions as those I now propose to lay down . . . I would such persons could calm themselves so far as to remember that, however justly they may rejoice in God's great gift, yet it was from human teachers they themselves learnt to read. . . .' This is a principle which perhaps needs underlining in certain anti-intellectual Christian circles today.

2. The core of the Christian curriculum should be the Bible, which supplies its unifying principle. (It is not, perhaps, possible to justify this in modern secular education, but the idea of having a core of

concentration is gaining increasing recognition in curriculum development.) The Bible must be interpreted in accordance with sound linguistic method and in its doctrinal entirety.

3. All other branches of learning may be used to help expound the Bible. 'Let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master.' This principle is illustrated in *On Christian Doctrine* by reference to the subjects which formed the curriculum of the secular schools of his day. The Christian must use discernment, on the sound classical principle *ne quid nimis* (nothing in excess). 'I think that it is well to warn studious and able young men, who fear God and are seeking for happiness of life, not to venture heedlessly upon the pursuit of the branches of learning that are in vogue beyond the pale of the Church of Christ, as if these could secure for them the happiness they seek; but soberly and carefully to discriminate among them.'⁹ One significant omission seems to be the knowledge of pagan religion. Apart from superstitious practices in connection with divination, he barely mentions the religious ideas of his non-Christian contemporaries. Many of his readers would, of course, be recent converts from paganism and would hardly need exhorting to learn about it. The point is worth making in the modern debate about world religions in schools.

4. The Christian communicator needs to understand the principles of language, to know the means whereby ideas are translated from one language into another and to appreciate how ideas are communicated to the learner. He must have grasped the rules of speech, so that he can use the spoken word to produce the desired effect. Both teacher and learner must be active in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. The faculties of memory and reason are to be fully employed. 'Through words we learn only words . . . the knowledge of words is completed only after the things they signify are understood.'¹⁰

5. The intellectual disciplines, such as mathematics and logic, should be esteemed more highly than either the practical arts and sciences or aesthetic subjects. Here Augustine was undoubtedly influenced by Platonic ideas. What interest he did show in elementary science was used in the service of understanding references to these things in the Bible. His opposition to aesthetic subjects was due partly to philosophical considerations (an object of art was not 'real' and was therefore liable to mislead one) and partly to the fact that the art of provincial North Africa was so bound up with pagan worship. Notice, however, that, unlike some early Fathers, he did not proscribe these subjects. Indeed, he advocated the use of philosophy, especially the writings of the Platonists, because they contained sound moral instruction.

6. The teacher must first possess virtue before he can teach others. 'Do not look for an evil teacher; if a man is evil, then he is not a teacher; if he is a teacher, then he is not evil.'¹¹ 'The man who speaks wisely and eloquently, but lives wickedly, may, it is true, instruct many

who are anxious to learn . . . but he would do good to very many more if he lived as he preaches."¹

7. The aim of the Christian educator should be to draw the learner away from pre-occupation with material objects to the service of God, his supreme source of happiness and fulfilment, and of his neighbour. Love of God and one's neighbour for God's sake should influence the teacher in treating each student as an individual, created in the image of God, who, in spite of his sin, still bears vestiges of his divine origin and is always open to redemption. 'I am a witness to you, as regards my own experience, that I find myself variously moved, according as I see before me, for the purposes of catechetical instruction, a highly educated man, a dull fellow, a citizen, a foreigner, a rich man, a poor man, a private individual, a man of honours, a person occupying some position of authority, an individual of this or the other nation, of this or the other age or sex, one proceeding from this or the other sect, from this or the other common error—and ever in accordance with the difference of my feelings does my discourse itself at once set out, go on, and reach its end. And inasmuch as, although the same charity is due to all, yet the same medicine is not to be administered to all, in like manner charity itself travails with some, is made weak together with others; is at pains to edify some, tremblingly apprehends being an offence to others; bends to some, lifts itself erect to others; is gentle to some, severe to others; to none an enemy, to all a mother.'² As we read these words we feel that, not only are we in the presence of a great teacher and stylist, but a true saint. No wonder Augustine's biographer, Possidius, could write:

'Those who read what he has written on divine things can profit much. But I think that the greatest profit was enjoyed by those who were able to hear and see him preach in the church and especially by those who were able to enjoy personal conversation with him.'³ What greater testimony does a teacher need?

¹ F. Clarke, as quoted S. J. Curtis and M. E. A. Boulwood, *A Short History of Educational Ideas*, UTP, third ed., 1961, p. 535.

² Eph. 6:4.

³ R. Ulich, *A History of Religious Education*, ULP, 1968, p. 34.

⁴ *Confessions*, I, ix, 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, xiii, 20.

⁶ T. S. K. Scott-Craig, Art 'On Christian Instruction' in R. W. Battenhouse (ed.), *A Companion to the Study of S. Augustine*, OUP, New York, 1955.

⁷ *De doctrina christiana*, Pref., 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, II, xviii, 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, II, xxxix, 58.

¹⁰ *De magistro*, 36.

¹¹ *De libero arbitrio*, i, 3.

¹² *De doct. chr.*, IV, xxvii, 59-60.

¹³ *De catechizandis rudibus*, xv, 23.

¹⁴ *Vita Augustini* (ca. AD 432), 31.

Literature

THE works both by and about Augustine are immense. The best modern biography is P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, Faber, 1967. An indispensable tool for further study is the Battenhouse volume cited note 6 above. G. Howie, *Educational Theory and Practice in St. Augustine*, RKP, 1969 is a full-length treatment of the subject (reviewed in *Spectrum*, Vol. 2, No. 1). The same author has translated extracts from all the major works under the title *St. Augustine on Education*, published in the USA. Vol. 6 of the Library of Christian Classics, SCM, contains a translation by J. H. S. Burleigh of *De Magistro*. Translations of *De catechizandis rudibus* and *De doctrina christiana* are included in A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. P. Schaff, reprinted Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1956, Vols. II and III. Translations of the *Confessions* are available in Nelsons Classics (E. B. Pusey) and Fontana (Matthew revised Hudleston). Pelican Classics have produced a new translation of the *City of God* (H. Bettenson, 1972). The Saint Augustine Lecture Series of specialist topics is published by Villanova University Press, USA.