

Augustine and Cassiodorus on Education

This essay attempts a firmer understanding of the attitudes of Augustine and Cassiodorus towards the liberal arts through examination of Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* (*DDC*) and Cassiodorus' *Institutiones* (*Inst.*). Both sources will be preceded by brief biographical summaries including these authors' late antique contexts and the nature and purpose of each work. I intend to show that Augustine was indeed cautious towards pagan* learning, yet ultimately more open to its use than has heretofore been proposed by some scholars. His approach was governed by a doctrine of divine providence that was in turn the basis of a belief in the potential utility of *artes liberales* in scriptural exegesis. Cassiodorus quite intentionally identified himself with this Augustinian tradition, yet pushed the practical bent in parts of Augustine's otherwise theoretical *DDC* to a logical extreme.

One cannot read *DDC* without encountering the problematic issue of Augustine's relationship with contemporary culture in general, and the liberal arts in particular. Hagendahl offered the most exhaustive survey of the influence of classical Latin literature upon Augustine; he saw a "radical change" after which Augustine entered a period of "contemptuous censure of profane culture in all its aspects" (1967). Augustine's changing attitude towards classical literature reaches its zenith in *Confessions*: "[h]ardly any work by a Christian writer since Tertullian breathes such a deep-seated hostility to the old cultural tradition as this manifesto of fanatical religiosity" (*ibid.*). Thirty years after Hagendahl's opus, Augustine's attitude is seemingly settled: his "hostility toward classical education in his later writings seems clear enough. He found it built upon praise and thus prone to cultivate pride in its masters" (Hughes 2008). Thus it seems some modern research has been unduly influenced by *Confessions*; the scholarship is complicated, moreover, by the sheer length of Augustine's career and the bulk of his oeuvre. A reading of *DDC* must be informed by these factors, and I will specifically employ Augustine's *Retractions* (*Retr.*) and *De Ordine* (*De Ord.*) to this end.

The most telling statement of Augustine's approach to pagan *artes liberales* comes in the form of a metaphor: pagan literature is to Christians at the end of the Roman empire as Egyptian "gold" was to the Israelites. Released from captivity, the Hebrew people availed themselves to whatever valuables they could as they left slavery, converting foreign goods to their own sacred ends (Exodus 12:35-6). This metaphor appeared in Origen some two centuries before *DDC*, and would be taken up later by Cassiodorus. It is not the only image used by Augustine; this essay will examine a lesser known, if even more effective metaphor of Christians "mining" all the earth for elements of divine providence. Together these metaphors bolster one of the most significant ancient admonishments for Christian learning in history. They are even more important

* It is important to bear in mind the idea that the "pagan"-Christian dichotomy owes much to Christian rhetoric from the first century onwards (Williams 2006; Young 1997). Nevertheless, for the sake of simplicity, I will refrain from either quotations or relatively cumbersome alternatives. Pagans are here those individuals outside Christian orthodoxy as my two authors understood that term.

here for two reasons: first because they show Augustine acting as intellectual and theological heir to his patristic predecessors; second, because they underscore Augustine's primary criterion for determining whether any given manifestation of human knowledge is acceptable to the Christian. As to his predecessors, I will focus on Origen; as to the criterion, a subject's worth is a function of its potential use in scriptural exegesis.

Thus Augustine's attitude toward traditional *artes liberales*, the content and character of which will be discussed, is fundamentally practical. The utility of pagan letters is in turn a primary characteristic of Cassiodorus' *Institutiones*, who is the most significant early receptor of *DDC*. The bishop of Hippo is mentioned some ten times by name in the two books that form *Inst.* My focus will be on Book II as one of the most important discussions of the liberal arts in late antiquity.

Augustine and Cassiodorus are united in their practical bent: the various *disciplinae* are to be *used* in order to strengthen one's appreciation of scripture. Both want to claim secular letters for the "service of truth" as opposed to pride or "cleverness" (Cassiodorus 1.27). Like Augustine, Cassiodorus is quick to highlight patristic precedents of holy individuals "accommodating" secular "clothing" for Christian use (1.28). Cassiodorus is less theoretical than Augustine, however, and is keen to include non-scholarly readers in his audience; he goes so far as to recommend works on gardening to those who find the life of a scribe too tedious.

This essay concludes by comparing the intentions of Augustine and Cassiodorus to their actual historical receptions. While they shared an interest in sublimating pagan literature, the sections of their works dealing with the liberal arts (as opposed to monastic discipline or hermeneutics) were the most widely read long after their deaths. Regardless of any misgivings the two authors had, what were to them essentially "propaedeutic" arts became the "liberal arts" that would eventually eschew any utilitarian basis for their existence.