Book Reviews

Paul Rigby


Late modern and postmodern readers are acutely aware of the distance that separates them from ancient texts. Therefore, when approaching these texts, today’s reader is faced with a decision: should one attempt to overcome this distance by way of historical reconstruction or postmodern deconstruction? According to Rigby, contemporary readers of the Confessions have, by and large, done the latter, and have thereby introduced a hermeneutic of suspicion into their interpretation and evaluation of Augustine’s testimony. In fact, we are at the point today, he contends, where Augustine’s voice has become muted amid the cacophony of Freudian analysis and postmodern deconstruction. In this light, Rigby’s task in this book is admirable: he seeks to “understand how Augustine’s original readers ... received Augustine’s shocking new testimony,” so that the bishop of Hippo’s voice can be heard today “with the same shocking freshness it had for his contemporaries” (4, 2).

To accomplish his task, however, Rigby does not turn to historical reconstruction as one might expect. Rather, he believes that he can create common ground on which Augustine and the heirs of modernity are able to meet by putting Augustine on the stand, as it were, and by allowing those who have shaped modern thought—Hegel, Freud, Nietzsche, and Heidegger—to cross-examine him. Throughout the book, the thought of Paul Ricoeur serves as Rigby’s guide, or, in his words, as “the witness stand” on which Augustine responds to his accusers (2). In this way, Rigby seeks to bring Augustine into direct conversation with the assumptions and challenges brought to his text by late modern and postmodern readers. It is precisely here in this approach that the novelty of Rigby’s work is found, and it is the basis on which his book should be judged.

The book consists of eleven chapters. In the first three chapters, Rigby makes use of modern critiques to present his own approach to the Confessions as a confessional narrative. In Chapter 1, he considers the modern suspicion of
individual testimony and points out that there are instances where testimony is considered credible, such as in the context of a trial. However, he also notes that it is important to recognize that testimony proves itself through its unique “lyric economy,” and, when Augustine's testimony is read in this way, it too proves itself to be credible (11). Rigby moves on in Chapter 2 to challenge the common Freudian reading of the Confessions. Far from revealing Augustine's infantile wish for omnipotence and immortality, Rigby argues, the Confessions actually resolves the Oedipal complex and so overcomes the neurotic outcome central to Freud's analysis, both in terms of his relationship with his own parents and, by extension, his relationship with God. In Chapter 3, Rigby turns to the Nietzschean challenge. He asks: do the central doctrines found in the Confessions “only serve to ground a narcissistically consoling divine plot”? (59). In conversation with Frank Kamode, Rigby makes the case that the Confessions narrative is not narcissistic at all, but rather that it is an “efficacious medium of universal redemption” (59). By the end of this third chapter, therefore, the reader has considered Augustine's response to three of the most significant challenges modernity poses to the Confessions.

The next five chapters prove to be the heart of the book, for it is here where Rigby applies his approach directly to some of the central theological issues he finds at work in the Confessions: evil, predestination, free will, and grace. In Chapter 4, Rigby addresses the problem of evil, which occupies a central place in the Confessions. He argues that Augustine's use of the confession genre results in a “trans-ethical narrative” which overcomes both Manichaean dualism and Platonism's denial of substantive evil (81). In chapters 5 and 6, he turns his attention to Augustine's doctrine of original sin. It is here where Rigby's voice really begins to emerge and be distinguished from that of Ricoeur. Though he appeals to Ricoeur's narrative theory of action, against Ricoeur's conclusion, Rigby makes the case that Augustine's use of narrative allows him to “elaborate a conceptually coherent account of the Pauline servile will” (102). The doctrine of original sin, he claims, is not a matter of theodicy, as most scholars see it, but rather a matter of ontology; through an historical narrative of evil, Augustine seeks to understand original sin, not explain it.

In Chapter 7, Rigby turns to the questions of predestination and free will. He argues that modern criticisms which claim Augustine's teaching on these two points is contradictory wrongly read him within the framework of a justice discourse. Instead, Rigby claims, when Augustine's ultimate appeal to mystery on the question of predestination is viewed within the narrative context he constructs in the Confessions, his consideration of the mystery of God's grace rightly becomes that of a “confessional wanderer” (146). In Chapter 8, Rigby addresses further the role of mystery and of wisdom discourse within the