

Philosopher Lecturette

The Saints: St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas



St. Aquinas

Your textbook provides us with a nice overview of the views of the "Saints." Please be sure to read pp. 144, "The Medieval Period" in the Ruggiero textbook along with this Lecturette. This brief lecturette is designed to SUPPLEMENT the information provided in your text, not reiterate it.



St. Augustine

St. Augustine lived nearly 800 years before St. Aquinas. However, they both are considered great thinkers and Ethicists of the Medieval era. Both are major players in the history of the Catholic/Christian church, which played an enormous role in the history of Western thought during this time period.

Augustine's Confessions remain a cornerstone of intellectual study and thought. He arrived at his belief that our lives are simply a means to Heaven after years of living a life which was "evil" in his own words. His rebirth through Christianity is in direct conflict with his life as a young man. Augustine brought Plato's views into and through the Medieval time, which argued for a life of reason equating into a life of faith and salvation.

"Heaven forbid that God should hate in us that by which we he made us superior to the animals! Heaven forbid that we should believe in such a way as not to accept or seek reasons, since we could not even believe if we did not possess rational souls." (Augustine, In Lindberg and Numbers, 1986:27-28)

"(I)n certain matters pertaining to the doctrine of salvation that we cannot grasp by reason – though one day we shall be able to do so – faith must precede reason and purify the heart and make it fit to receive and endure the great light of reason....for faith to precede reason in

certain matters of great moment that cannot yet be grasped, surely the very small portion of reason that persuades us of this must precede faith.” (Augustine, In Lindberg and Numbers, 1986:27-28)

Aquinas reinvented Aristotle and brought his resurgence into the end of the Medieval period. Aristotle’s virtue ethics (which have seen a similar re-emergence in the 21st Century) explain that natural law and theological law can co-exist by the discovery of reason and the cultivation of conscience. Aquinas pushed for the elimination of guilt as a motivator, and continued Augustine’s movement to allow the Sciences to rediscover a place in Christian society.

St. Augustine wrote that:

One does not read in the Gospel that the Lord said: I will send you the Paraclete who will teach you about the course of the sun and moon. For He willed to make them Christians, not mathematicians. (“The Galileo Affair.”

Catholic.net. <http://www.catholic.net/rcc/Periodicals/Issues/GalileoAffair.html>)

Steve Riker, a scholar on Augustine and Aquinas has written this:

Aquinas thought, with Augustine, that human beings were inclined toward evil after the Fall. Yet Aquinas differed with Augustine as to the degree of damage original sin inflicted on humanity. Aquinas felt that concupiscence [defined: sexual hunger] was compatible with human beings being inclined also toward the good. Thus, for Aquinas concupiscence, after once again cutting away all the indefensible entailments, will be presented as the pool of all human desires, which can be either good or evil. This view of concupiscence is even more plausible than Augustine’s, in that it acknowledges the prevalence of evil in the world, yet also recognizes the possibility for human goodness. (Riker, “Concupiscence in Augustine and Aquinas.” <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/riker>

Both Augustine and Aquinas were concerned with the role human sexuality played with respect to good vs. evil. Their Catholic roots tended to cause this to have center stage in their ethical and moral value judgments, probably more so than all of the other Ethicists we study this term.

(Both depictions of paintings on this page are in the public domain. Augustine is found at: <http://utopia.utexas.edu/project/portraits/>. Aquinas is found at: http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Image:St_thomas_aquinas.jpg