The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures Book Review

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Abstract

This paper is a review of The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures by Justo L. González. The book is a biography of Augustine of Hippo, more commonly known as Saint Augustine, a Christian bishop, philosopher, and theologian who lived in the fourth and fifth century who had a lasting impact on how we view Christianity. The book also covers his views on faith, philosophy and how he came to acquire such views through a cultural context. González's work is theologically significant because it analyzes the works and life of Saint Augustine through the cultural context of a "Mestizaje" or someone of mixed cultures.

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The Spanish terms “mestizo” and “mestizaje” refer to being a part of two different realities, but at the same time, none at all, referring to cultures. According to the author and Cuban-American Theologian, Justo L. González, when one is a part of two different cultures, you are not just in a two different cultures, one might find themselves where in a situation where they aren’t accepted by either, like how a Mexican-American was rejected by people in Texas for not being a part of Euro-American culture and then rejected again by Mexicans for being “Americanized” or “pocho” (15). Saint Augustine was a prominent Christian bishop, Philosopher, and theologian who lived in Hippo and was alive during 354 AD to 430 AD whose works heavily influenced the church, but another important aspect of his character that González wants to show in his book The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures is that Augustine was also mestizo; his father was Roman and his mother was Berber (29-30). Augustine’s life was also influenced by being mestizo, using the rhetoric from his father’s culture with his mother’s faith, which was Christianity. González also uses mestizo themes as a frame for understanding Augustine’s views on Christianity, his works, and his incredible life.

Summary

The first section of The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures is about Augustine’s early life, his education, and the cultural contexts within the world at the time. The book was intended for those who are interested in teachings of Augustine and those of other cultures, using other cultures as a frame to see Augustine and his teachings in a new light.

Augustine was born in Tagaste, Numidia by Patrick, a Roman official, and Monica, a Berber and a devout Christian in 354 AD. This area in particular was under Roman occupation and under their government despite mostly being of Berber people. According to the culture at

the time, Romans were the ones in power, while those of berber origin were considered second class citizens. Monica was well aware of this fact, which is why she heavily objected and disapproved of Augustine having a concubinatus relationship with an unnamed woman with lower social class that he also later had a kid with (34-35). At a young age, he was a curious boy, so much so that a relative of his took interest in him and sent him off to a school in Carthage (34). Augustine later learned that using rhetoric was more for being able to give compelling speeches and arguments, but not so useful for learning the truth (36). However, his insatiable search for intellectual material led him down a path to learn about stoicism, followed by skepticism, and then Manichaeism, before eventually returning back to Christianity (37).

The second section of the book focuses on how he starts understanding Christianity and comes to get baptized. For a while, he still did not have a good grasp on Christian scripture, not finding much value in it (43). It wasn't until he listened to a bishop named Ambrose that he was able to actually interpret scripture. He learned how to use teaching's of his father's culture, namely rhetoric, allegorical interpretation and ideas from neoplatonism, stoicism, etc., and was able to use it to understand scripture, find value in it, while also being able to accept the Faith of Christianity (43-45). He was baptized in 387 (55).

Section three follows his start of his faith and his newfound responsibilities. He was able to more or less help create a rich monastic community in Tagaste that wasn't only about devotion or conversation, but also help the people there, strengthen their faith, and indulge in study (64-65). Seemingly reluctantly, he became the bishop of Hippo after getting invited there, after being a presbyter. Part of the reason he was there was because, as a mestizo, who understood the concepts of Manichaeism and Donatism, both such influences were becoming somewhat of a threat in Hippo. Augustine was very familiar with Manichaeism due to following some of its

teachings for nine years when he was younger. Donatism was primarily in Latin and Augustine was very familiar with Latin rhetoric from his youth and his African culture, through his mother, was familiar to him as Donatism's influence has been spreading to the African community (69-71). Section 4 is about his struggles against the Manichaeism community. González writes a few pages on Manichaeism, detailing their key beliefs, in case the audience was unfamiliar with it (81-87). Augustine not only wrote several works against Manichaeism and its concepts, he also publicly debated against Manichaean leaders, even causing some to convert (87-88).

Sections five, six, and seven follow similar structures as chapter four, but with background and concepts of Donatism, Pelagianism, and Paganism respectively; their social, political, and cultural contexts; as well as Augustine's arguments against them. For example in section five, on Donatism, who claimed their church was the real one, he was against their historical and theological arguments, but was primarily against their stance that the church needed it's members to be considered holy, and they had to exclude people who were considered tratidores, which means they are unholy (112). Augustine refutes that by claiming not only are a lot of their members unholy for justifying violence among other vices, but that they aren't holy because there is a lack of love, the thing that is a part of holiness, and most importantly, the thing of the church that is holy is the head, Jesus (113). The last section has González stating that Augustine should be used as a lens to view the church centuries ago compared to how they are in modern times. Scripture and faith is definitely difficult for some to grasp, including Augustine at first, but Augustine was able to use his mixed heritage. his different experiences with other cultures to view Christianity in a new way.

Critique

This book is well made for even those who struggle understanding scripture and faith. González goes in depth with these descriptions of other religions and cultures so that the audience has full context for Augustine's arguments against it, thus not only strengthening the argument, but also making the argument more approachable to understand. For example, when González talks about Manichaeism, he goes over their origins in Persia from a prophet named Mani, whose beliefs stemmed from Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Christianity (81) and the concept that Manichaeism solved was the nature and origin of good and evil, where there wasn't a single creator God, but two eternal principles, light and darkness, and that all evil was created from darkness (83). On pg. 44, González writes how Augustine started to understand scripture using allegorical interpretation that he learned from studying literature and other schools of thought as a base instead of taking scripture literally at face value like he has for so long. González not only masterfully breaks down the cultures of the time period when Augustine was alive, but also the concepts and theories of the denominations and other schools of thought. González is convincing in his argument for mestizo viewpoints because he actually shows Augustine's teachings by showing multiple cultures and schools of thought and uses them to frame and explain Christianity.

Conclusion

The main theme of the book is mestizo and multiculturalism, and González does a remarkable job showing it. Augustine was mestizo, he was bound not only by the two cultures of his parents, but by the cultures of the time period. By comparing cultures, denominations, and schools of thought, the book easily explains Christian lessons and how Augustine saw the world and Christianity. This book is ideal for those who are interested in multiculturalism and

Christianity, and those who are interested in using multiculturalism as a lens for viewing Christianity.

References

González Justo L. (2016). *The Mestizo Augustine: A theologian between two cultures*. IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press.