Christian Thought
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Book Review: The Mestizo Augustine
Read 100%

The Mestizo Augustine, Justo L. Gonzalez, 2016

Thesis: The Mestizo Augustine is about how the life and theology of St. Augustine are in certain ways of mixed races; the book is pertinent to today's world and church considering how both have become increasingly multicultural.

Justo L. Gonzalez begins his book with defining the word Mestizaje. A spanish word that refers to something, usually a person, that is of mixed races. Gonzalez then explains how this just like many Hispanic people today living in the US, the great theologian from history St. Augustine was also a mestizo. Augustine was a mestizo, says Gonzalez, and adds that that reality is eventually felt in his theology and literary works. The book begins like a biography and somewhere along the middle of the book serious attention is placed on his various theological works, and his entanglements with those he sought to refute. In every chapter though, attention is brought to how his life or work was influenced by his mestizaje. The book seems to be for Christians particularly, and specifically for those interested in history. Furthermore, it seems to me Gonzalez wants to write a book for hispanics, as he is hispanic, but generally for all those who have a hyphenated culture (i.e. Dominican-American, Mexican-American, African-American, etc). The book might also be for Protestants who are not so acquainted with the life or work of St. Augustine.

Among the things to be celebrated in this work is Gonzalez's biographical skills. I was personally enthralled as the events of Augustine's life unfolded. I felt the great heights and the

devastating lows that formed the life of Augustine. On page 60 we read of the happiness Augustine shared with his mother on her deathbed,

"Our colloquy led us to the point where the pleasures of the body's senses, however intense and in however brilliant a material light enjoyed, seemed unworthy not merely of comparison but even of remembrance beside the joy of that life, and we lifted ourselves in longing yet more ardent toward That Which Is, and step by step traversed all bodily creatures and heaven itself, whence sun and moon and stars shed their light upon the earth."

We can also see Augustine's broken heart upon losing his first concubine in page 45,

"The woman with whom I had been cohabiting was ripped from my side, being regarded as an obstacle to my marriage. So deeply was she engrafted into my heart that I was left torn and wounded and trailing blood."

Of course, Augustine's ethnic mestizaje is woven all throughout the tales.

The only thing that seemed slightly off to me was how much Gonzalez delved into the theological debates that Augustine regularly found himself in; which isn't wrong per se, but going into the minutiae of Augustine's theological quarrels didn't necessarily make the case of his mestizaje. Other than that Gonzalez still does a great job of making the case for Augustine's mestizaje. Not only in his life, considering his mother was ethnically a Berber and his father a Roman official, but also in his theological work. Consider on page 183 Gonzalez summarizes Augustine's theological mestizaje this way:

"His conversion was based on the possibility of living Monica's faith within Patrick's culture. When confronted with the Donatists, he opted for Roman traditions in which authority was grounded on the office more than on the behavior of a person. He preferred this over the African traditional view, in which authority was derived from one's behavior—and, in the case of church leaders, from holiness. Later, when facing the Pelagians—who quite correctly pointed to his "Africanness"—he took the opposite option, arguing that the authority of the sovereign God does not depend on God following human notions of justice. Now, before the Roman debacle, while he grieves over it, he blames not only the Gothic invaders but also the Romans themselves. In reality, believers in Christ are not citizens of Rome or of the Visigothic nation—both of which are expressions of the earthly city—but rather have a different and higher citizenship."

The assertion that two worlds always defined Augustine seems to be true. Gonzalez demonstrates how from the beginning of Augustine's life to the end, with City of God, a multiplicity of origins pulled at his being. In response to the fall of Rome Augustine is quoted saying in page 180,

> "Two loves founded two cities. The love of self to the point of neglecting God founded the earthly city. And the love of God to the point of neglecting self founded the heavenly one. The first glories in itself, and the second glorifies God above everything else. The first boasts of its own glory, and the second says to God: "You are my glory and it is you who allow me to hold my head high." The first rules over the princes and the nations that it has subjected under the impulse of the concupiscence for power. In the second, all serve one another in mutual love, the rulers advising and the subjects obeying."

The reality previously stated can still be felt today.

In the end, Gonzalez successfully demonstrated Augustine's mestizo life, and his mestizo theology (even if it was delivered with exceeding detail). My last criticism of the book is a section that was wholly missing: the application. Gonzalez never tells us hispanics or the other "hyphenated" peoples how to embrace our mestizaje, and use it to our advantage. Gonzalez never mentions how mestizaje theology might be the future of today's church, as many "empires" today seem to be on the precipice of disaster. With that said however, I'd still recommend this book because the present church needs to reconcile its multiple origins, and reading on Augustine is a great start towards that goal.