

## Review of “Augustine: A New Biography” by James O’Donnell

**A Review of *Augustine: A New Biography*, by James J. O’Donnell, New York: HarperCollins, 2006, paperback, 396 + 15.**

*This review is written to help those wanting to read a good book on Augustine who might be fooled by this bad one. The book has been on the market for 7 years, but since I endured reading it, I felt I should record my opinion of it here.*

Augustine is not one of my favorite theologians. Yes, he was brilliant and persuasive. Yes, he deserves an exalted place in the history of Christian Doctrine. He certainly elicits my esteem. But in my view his teachings have done more harm than good. Augustine’s ecclesiology and eschatology have skewed the teaching of the New Testament. His predestinarianism, with its consigning of non-elected babies to perdition, I find a cold and unbalanced logic.

I say this so that the reader will know that I am no member of the Augustine Fan Club. But neither am I such a bumptious snob that I cannot admire this great man. Any reader of Peter Brown’s marvelous biography (as O’Donnell agrees – 73), or of Augustine himself, will find it hard to come away without abiding respect for the man. Augustine is an intellectual giant whose writings, both for good and ill, have shaped much of the Western World. He deserves respect even while he merits critical scrutiny.

But readers will find neither quality in evidence in this dismal effort by James O’Donnell. O’Donnell’s book suffers under the unbearable personality of its creator. It is a vehicle for his feelings. A pulpit for his professorial cynicism. Augustine himself is not the leading figure of his biography, O’Donnell’s ego pushes him aside so that he can retell his story. The saint must be quiet; someone really clever wants to speak! I was reminded of the wit who said, “When I want your opinion, I’ll give it to you.”

Augustine, it seems, told us a tall tale which we all believed. O’Donnell is here to tell the truth. The best way to do that is to let the author don the garb of a surrogate storyteller. First order of business is to dismiss Augustine’s own witness. The gaping hole that is left can then be filled with the sort of history which this bitter writer thinks should have been written but, until now, wasn’t. That is how the truth is arrived at in the Classics Departments of some Universities. The would-be hip postmodernist O’Donnell deconstructs Augustine before our eyes. There are, in fact, several Augustine’s; none of them particularly attractive or worthy.

Now it is true that Augustine was a master rhetorician, and O’Donnell is right to signal this fact loudly and clearly. But to cynically cast Augustine as a ruthless brown-noser and showman (36, 92-93, 119), and sub-par intellectual is another thing. For O’Donnell, Augustine is like “Dickens’s Mr Macawber,... always waiting for something to turn up” (51); a man who “was always on the make” (89).

O'Donnell introduces us to an Augustine who presents us with several versions of himself, none of whom is the real man. But in his attempt to lay bare the true saint, O'Donnell presents various specimens of himself. First he is the well versed Classicist. But he quickly changes into O'Donnell the Shrink (a character he enjoys playing). We also meet O'Donnell the Cynic, O'Donnell the Storyteller, O'Donnell the Postmodernist; Oh, and O'Donnell the Moralist!

Every so often he wanders off into a scenario of his own making to make some point or other against a worldview which he all too clearly bitterly despises (80-81; 171-172; 174; 202ff.). His real motives are all too apparent to everyone but those fellow academics laboring under the same delusions of grandeur.

He wonders why nobody has had a good laugh at Augustine's expense. He writes a whole chapter comparing Augustine and his beliefs with Don Quixote. Such kitschy sentiments, while telling us nothing about the saint, speak volumes about his "biographer." Here the author fits the bill of the Hollywood stereotype liberal prof who has a sardonic comment for every occasion and who quickly becomes a bore. Really, when will professional academics learn that in patronizing their readers and speaking condescendingly about their betters they turn themselves into the choicest fools? Rather like the hardened atheist who hates God so much he cannot stop talking about Him, O'Donnell uses his 400 pages to pour his scorn into (with plenty left over for the interview the back of the book). What is truly laughable is that the author has invested his academic life in the study of someone he obviously dislikes intensely. Now there's grist for the psychologists mill!

This book abounds in silly statements of all sorts. For instance, he thinks Christians haven't thought through the doctrine of resurrection (109); has a go at C.S. Lewis for taking for granted (according to O'Donnell!) that all cultured men would embrace Christianity (139). Lewis, of course, held no such foolish notion. Athanasius is redone and presented as "the greatest theological diva of the age" (196). But wait, this book is about Augustine isn't it? Not really. It's about James O'Donnell's intense dislike of Augustine and Christian Faith. Being as it is a public declaration of his disdain, it is not surprising to find the author contradicting himself. Hippo was a prosperous city (88), but was "a nothing town" (1). Christians were not really targets for persecution (193), but they were (210).

When he takes on the mantle of a theologian O'Donnell is plain pathetic. On page 65 he recommends Sabellianism. Page 83 has him pontificating that no one can be sure whether his soul will be saved or lost (83). Paul apparently, "never met Jesus and became an "apostle" by virtue of his encounter with Jesus's god on the road to Damascus." (100). He doesn't provide the reference; doubtless because he couldn't find it!

O'Donnell claims that "the books making up the Old Testament (on Augustine's reckoning) had been written some in Greek but mainly in Hebrew." (198). Now to be charitable, he may mean that Augustine reckoned some of the OT was written in Greek, but that is highly unlikely both historically and grammatically. It is safer to assume the ignorance lies with the man who wrote that sentence.

“When Christians assert that the divine is knowable, they have to accept that their god is at the same time obscure, difficult, and absent.” (181). We “have to” accept this you understand? O’Donnell the hack theologian has spoken.

Indeed, he is such a lousy theologian that he cannot twig why Augustine rejected Nectarius’s claim to be Christian (185-188). His ventures into the realms of profundity are embarrassing (e.g. 191-193), probably the result of ignoring the scholarship of all but the most looney liberals (who never read conservative scholars either), or of relying on less than credible histories by Walter Bauer and Ramsay MacMullen. While speaking of Christian faith as hokum, he rests a great deal of blind faith in modern cognitive science (326-327).

He doesn’t seem to understand the issues at stake in Pelagianism (110), and says, “Whether there ever was such a thing as Pelagianism may reasonably be doubted.” Lots of things O’Donnell believes are reasonable appear to this reader to be powered, not by reason but by malice. So, “Christianity, to Augustine and many of his contemporaries”, held belief in a “universal and all-powerful” God. (111, cf. 180). He says this despite earlier insisting that Augustine would have only thought of his God as one among any number of gods (hence his infantile reluctance to capitalize the G, even when quoting Christian writers themselves).

The book is filled with unfounded speculation. Just because the author knows (but thoroughly dislikes) his subject, does not mean he has the right to reconstruct the past out of his own imagination. This is history as O’Donnell wants it to be. But despite the author’s evident hostility towards Christianity and the Bible, and his best efforts at making Augustine look small, it is he who looks peevish and small-minded, while Augustine, in those relatively few times he is permitted to present himself, manages to make the exact opposite impression O’Donnell wishes him to make. O’Donnell seriously thinks he carries enough clout to cast Augustine as a modest intellect. In truth, only with those arrogant few who will agree with him!

O’Donnell doesn’t know how to write biography. But this deficiency is of little consequence because the book is more autobiographical than biographical.

“If we look for an unguarded, natural Augustine in his works, we will never find him. Do we catch glimpses? I notice the one who admits that he struggles to be high-minded...” (106). The author of this line suffers from no similar pangs of conscience.