

Robin Lane Fox, *Augustine: Conversions to Confessions* (Basic Books, 2015) ISBN 978-0-465-02227-4 (Hardcover); 657 pages; \$35

Almost fifty years after its original publication, Peter Brown's *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* continues to be required reading for any serious – and not so serious – student of Late Antique and medieval history. By providing a biographical account of Saint Augustine, Robin Lane Fox's magisterial new book appears to follow in Brown's footsteps. Lane Fox's own take on the saint's life, however, is profoundly different from earlier biographies. He does not piece together Augustine's life from birth to death. Rather, he focusses solely on the first half of the bishop's life: from his birth until his writing of the *Confessions*. In doing so, Lane Fox does not use Augustine's autobiography as a source for reconstructing the saint's life. Rather, he places Augustine's autobiographical project at the core of his argument.

Conversions to Confessions is not a traditional biography of Augustine, but an extensive yet lucid commentary on Augustine's own autobiographical project and its place in a broader historical, theological, and cultural context. Indeed, the book has the potential of reaching a broader audience than most books on Augustine. It offers some unique insights into the saint's life, which will please scholars of Late Antique history. However, the book's interest in providing a broader context for Augustine's life – coupled with its engrossing prose – may extend its reach into a more general audience, always a commendable aim for academic titles.

The book begins by introducing the two key terms from its title. Lane Fox suggests that Augustine's life can be understood as a series of intertwining confessions and conversions, processes which produced Augustine's unique outlook on his own life. The plural conversions is highly significant. Lane Fox reads Augustine's life as one of continual transformation, rather than as a straightforward journey towards Christianity. Indeed, for Lane Fox, Augustine's explorations of Manicheism and Neo-Platonism are as transformative as is his eventual Christian baptism. This idea is certainly generative, although the rest of the lengthy book sometimes seems to forget about these two terms and how the various events in Augustine's life inform and are informed by such processes. In this first section, Lane Fox also explains that, throughout his book, he will compare Augustine's life to the lives of Synesius and Libanius, two lesser-known Greek thinkers roughly contemporaneous with Augustine.

Following this brief theoretical framework, Lane Fox divides his book into six parts. The first four faithfully follow the structure laid out by Augustine's *Confessions*. In these sections, Lane Fox contextualises the first nine books of Augustine's autobiography; he provides his reader with a meticulous portrayal of the Late Antique world Augustine inhabited. Two lengthy excursus are particularly noteworthy. Part II (and in particular chapters 8 and 9) provides a robust exploration of Manicheism, its history and core beliefs. Given our limited knowledge of this religion, Lane Fox's discussions are as comprehensive as one could hope for. Unlike most scholarship on Augustine, Lane Fox views Augustine's Manicheism as a crucial conversion, rather than as a stepping stone towards Christianity. His account of this

religion's tenets will aid students of Augustine and Late Antique history.

Like his Manicheism, Augustine's Neo-Platonism is often glossed over, despite the influence of Neo-Platonist philosophy in most of the bishop's corpus. Remedying this, in Part III (and specifically Chapters 17 and 18), Lane Fox lucidly explains how Plotinus received and in certain cases transformed some of Plato's key arguments. In turn, he explains how 'this Platonist philosophy was to change the way in which Augustine regarded God, the world, evil and truth' (p. 241). Scholars of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages often use terms like 'Platonist' and 'Neo-Platonist' without sufficient discussion of what they actually mean. Lane Fox's careful account of the transmission of Plato's thought into Late Antiquity is most welcome.

Most of Lane Fox's meticulous historical discussions prove fruitful. However, this historical accuracy contrasts with some of his discussions of Augustine's psyche, which appear rather conjectural. Discussing Augustine's turmoil during his Neo-Platonist years, Lane Fox writes: 'If a psychologist could persuade him nowadays that what he sensed was due to his mental stress, Augustine would readily accommodate this suggestion to his existing view of God' (p. 243). Likewise, after describing a Greek hymn, Lane Fox writes: 'If Augustine, a decade earlier, could have read and sung this hymn, he would have been entranced by its call' (p. 260). Similar speculative statements – many ifs, coulds, and woulds – crop up throughout the book and distract from Lane Fox's otherwise meticulous historical accounts.

The contextualised retelling of the *Confessions* concludes in part four. In parts five and six, Lane Fox recounts Augustine's life from his mother's death (Book IX of the *Confessions*) until he began writing his autobiography. Throughout these sections, Lane Fox describes some of Augustine's overlooked works such as *On Two Souls* and *On the Usefulness of Being*, two important critiques of Manicheism. Lane Fox reminds the reader that the Augustinian corpus is extensive and multifaceted; it extends beyond the *Confessions* and *City of God*. Although Lane Fox no longer follows the structure of the *Confessions*, he continues to hold Augustine's autobiographical project at the core of his book. He carefully explains that Augustine's life and texts following his conversion eventually informed his autobiography. For instance, Lane Fox explains that '[s]elf-praise and its remedy, humility before God' – key themes in the earlier *On True Religion* – would eventually find resonance in the future bishop's greater confessional project (p. 485). These intertextual discussions are among the book's greatest triumphs. They raise exciting questions regarding Augustine's oeuvre; their conclusions rely on concrete textual evidence, rather than conjecture.

The book's final three chapters are even more argumentative and indeed polemical than is the rest of the book. Lane Fox argues against 'the prevailing scholarly view' that Augustine composed the *Confessions* 'over four to six years' (p. 522). He relies on the structure of the work, evidence from the *Retractions*, and a comparison to Libanius' own autobiographical writings to argue that the *Confessions* 'were composed...in a single continuous burst' (p. 524). Lane Fox's argument is convincing, especially given the *Confessions*' style, which resembles continuous prayer. The impact and accuracy of Lane Fox's concluding hypothesis, however,

remain to be seen and will certainly receive much critical and scholarly attention, whether positive or negative, over the next few years. Even if the single burst hypothesis is disproven, it is sure to catalyse new and exciting work on Augustine, work which ceases to view Augustinian chronology as fixed.

While the professional Augustinian scholar may find Lane Fox's sparse endnotes unappealing or even concerning, the bibliographical apparatus appears sufficient: it shows the author's careful use of primary and secondary material, without alienating a more general reader. The book's judiciously curated bibliography, moreover, will be of great assistance to undergraduate and graduate students alike. Finally, it includes thirty-three gorgeously printed full-colour plates, a surprising and very welcome perk given its affordability.

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