

Reviews

Eric Leland Saak. *Creating Augustine: Interpreting Augustine and Augustinianism in the Later Middle Ages*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. xv + 258 pp. \$125. ISBN: 978-0-19-964638-8.

This is an important study that needs to be “chewed and digested” (to quote Francis Bacon) by anyone interested in Augustine and Augustinianism in the later Middle Ages. It is also an argumentative study, with claims that will not be accepted indiscriminately by everyone. At the center of the book we have some impressive scholarly sleuthing to establish the provenance and interrelationship between the different texts included in the *Sermones ad fratres in eremo*, a collection of sermons supposedly written by Augustine, but which, except for two sermons, are pseudo-Augustine, forgeries from the early fourteenth century (chapter 3), followed by a thorough analysis of a series of visual representations of Augustine’s life influenced (or not) by these forgeries: church frescoes and stained-glass windows as well as series of drawings and book illuminations (chapter 4). This may not at first sight appear very promising material, yet E. L. Saak makes a convincing case why, by applying a necessary “double hermeneutic” that recognizes that “[t]he proper object of a historical hermeneutic is itself a hermeneutic that existed within its own historical matrix” (192), we need to take these texts and iconographic representations seriously in order to understand what it meant to be an Augustinian in the later Middle Ages. Indeed, contends Saak, only in this precise context do we have the right to talk about *Augustinian* at all, the confessional context being “an identifiable group the members of which identified themselves as being ‘Augustinian’” (12), i.e., the Order of Hermits of St Augustine (OESA). What made the order “the true sons of Augustine” (196), Saak goes on to argue in chapter 5, was its members’ commitment to the eremitical heritage of the Desert Fathers as expressed in the order’s understanding of Augustine’s religion; that is, by adhering to the monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, OESA constituted “Augustine’s body” (202).

So far so good. That a late medieval understanding of what it meant to be an Augustinian depended on a “myth of Augustine” (20) only loosely connected to what we today know about the historical Augustine is cogently argued, and Saak is also persuasive (I think) when he argues that OESA provides a highly relevant context for Martin Luther’s engagement with Augustine, and thus for the beginnings of Protestantism. Yet Saak becomes more contentious with his overarching argument that the context he explores in this study is the only permissible understanding of the term *Augustinian*. While admitting that even at the time there were dissenting voices from Augustinian Canons and others who doubted the authenticity of the *Sermones ad fratres in eremo* and contested the

Hermits' claims, he seems to reason that since "the Augustinian Hermits emerged as victors, and did so with papal sanction" (196), the discussion is therefore closed for us as well. It obviously does not strike him as problematic that the history of the victors should be the only permissible object of study for later historians and scholars. That Saak's own battles over what it means to be Augustinian (that bookend his study (against Heiko Oberman's anti-Pelagian perspective in particular) mirror the late medieval battles between Canons and Hermits does not make his position any less problematic. Indeed, the tone of sections of *Creating Augustine* reminds me of heated discussions I as a Swede overheard back in the 1970s about what constituted true communism, and that cannot be a good thing. This exclusive positioning is all the more strange since Saak begins his study with a cogent argument against reducing Augustine to one position, showing how the understanding of the Church Father has changed through the ages, depending on the particular perspectives applied. Yet his main argument nevertheless becomes the very opposite: during the particular period under investigation (the later Middle Ages) there can only be one single perspective and one single interpretation of the meaning of the word *Augustinian*. What is true for history in general suddenly is no longer true when applied to a shorter stretch of history. This is a pity, for shorn of this rhetorical superstructure there remains a highly valuable and timely study of one of the most important groups of Augustinians during the later Middle Ages.

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