

On Christian Teaching

by St. Augustine



The book selected for review is St. Augustine's treatise *On Christian Teaching*. Its leading topics are much broader than the title says. In part, they reflect the author's impressive achievements. St. Augustine was a Christian theologian and philosopher-mystic close to Neo-Platonism, and an influential representative of patristic. His worldview is of fideistic nature, subject to the principle that recognizes no knowledge without faith. His ideas have formed the solid basis for scholasticism. The influence of Augustine on the fate and the dogmatic side of Christian teaching is almost unprecedented. He determined the spirit and aims not only of African but also the entire Western church for several centuries ahead. Even though Augustine's integral teachings were not drawn up systematically, they have become an exemplary model for the thinkers of the West. Even today, they continue to compete with Thomism finding numerous adherents among Catholic theologians. The concept of predestination served as the inspirational basis for the Protestantism of Luther and Calvin. Augustine's personal religious and psychological motives gave rise to another line of influence, led by Pascal to Kierkegaard and existentialism (Franchi, 2011).

Augustine discusses a few important themes in the reviewed book. He develops a theory of signs, studies its application to the Bible, and



outlines certain principles of Christian education and teaching. One may state that *On Christian Teaching* presents some tools of appropriate understanding and successful Christian tutoring. Nevertheless, this claim is not entirely correct. The author basically devises such tools. Augustine uses different themes to prove the credibility of the pursued argument. The main statement of the book is the idea about the partner relationships between reader and text, the Scriptures and mankind as well as speaker and listener. A believer extracts and interprets the meaning from the Christian teachings. From the author's angle, the essence of the Christian doctrine is thereby a person's ability to perceive God's grace, and this guideline is reflected in his understanding of the other tenets of faith.

The review will argue that the book significantly changes the way one thinks about text, the Scriptures, and God. To substantiate this, it will analyze Augustine's theory of signs with respect to its contribution to semiotics, hermeneutics, homiletics, rhetoric, and exegetics. It will also explain his understanding of the Bible and outline the principles of Christian education in the narrower sense of the word. It is important to remember that these topics are substantially interrelated. The reviewer will start by studying the place of *On Christian Teaching* in Augustine's heritage and the composition of the book.



The Place of the Treatise in St. Augustine's Heritage and Its Composition

Augustine was a highly educated and erudite theologian besides a brilliant stylist. He managed to create a universal philosophical and theological system that unprecedentedly influenced the following generations of thinkers. The written heritage of Augustine is hard to grasp. It includes 93 works in 232 books and more than 500 letters and sermons (Bright, 2005). The meaning of his writings and their value for the overall development of human thought are tremendous. His priceless works can hardly be compared with the works of any other Western author in the first millennium of the Christian era. Augustine's great inner gifts, comprehensive content of his teachings, and extraordinary creative energy of his books had a strong impact on the further development of Christian education (Lee, 2012). The power of this impact is found in the medieval Catholicism and Protestantism as well as in both heretical and secular areas of religious thought. He has inspired many ideas in the fields of theology and philosophy, scientific methodology, ethics, aesthetics, psychology, and sociology. The works of Augustine are specifically remarkable for their theoretical depth and innovation. He was an active pastor-preacher with a wide range of communication. His ideas were widely disseminated.

Among the huge number of Augustine's writings, four works are of particular interest. Their significance goes far beyond theology due to the



fact that they had concentrated and epitomized the ideas that become the impetus for the further development of European human sciences. *The City of God (De Civitate Dei)*, *On Christian Teaching (De Doctrina Christiana)*, the dialogue *On the Trinity (De Trinitate)* and the early dialogue *On Music (De Musica)* made an invaluable contribution to the development of scientific mind. It could be argued that the thought of Augustine is incredibly sophisticated, encyclopedically comprehensive, and constantly focused on specific issues. The semiotic, logical, poetical, and historiosophic themes are presented in a variety of the author's writings. Nonetheless, some works are devoted primarily to the consideration of certain issues.

This review discusses one of the most important aforementioned works of Augustine, namely the treatise *On Christian Teaching*. Because of its special role in the development of European scientific thought, it is necessary first to briefly consider the overall composition of the book. It is dedicated to the theory of interpretation of Christian texts (hermeneutics and semiotics) and, to a lesser extent, the theory of expression (rhetoric and poetics) as well as Christian education. It reveals oppositions between the signs and objects, interpretation and expression, duality and confusion of the meaning, and challenges arising from them. In the first three chapters of the book, the hermeneutical ideas of Augustine reach their very peaks. The author develops something close to a textbook of biblical hermeneutics constructed under the rules of the traditional textbook rhetoric. He omits a detailed analysis. There is no discussion of controversial issues or doctrinal foundation in the



treatise, but only the conclusions.

St. Augustine's Theory of Signs

Based on findings and definitions of Augustine, it is evident that the author can clearly see and think through the questions related to the problems of the sign, signifier, and meaning and their understanding and interpretation. The book III of *On Christian Teaching* titled "Interpretation Required by the Ambiguity of Signs" lays the foundation stone of the famous Augustinian semiotics. De Saussure (1983) drew his inspiration from this particular semiotic concept. According to Jakobson (1960), Augustine made a brilliant guess at the theory of signs that interestingly reflected his thinking about the most important problems in the theory of verse. Augustine proposes certain fundamental ideas that have not lost their relevance after sixteen centuries.

At first, Augustine aimed to limit his treatise to hermeneutics. However, later, he added a section on the production of discourse, which is the fourth part of *On Christian Teaching*. It became the first rhetoric of the Christian world. Subsequently, the entire writing was explained by Augustine under the framework of the general theory of signs. The result is a book that can be fairly referred to as the first fundamental guide on semiotics (Todorov, 1984). *On Christian Teaching* can also be regarded as a very first book on homiletics.

Augustine begins presenting his ideas by suggesting a separation that



should be used as the basis of classification of sciences. He says that any teaching refers to either things or signs. Things are studied through the signs. A thing in its true sense of the word is defined by the author as something that is not used to refer to anything else. On the contrary, the signs stand for something such as words, for example. However, it is clear that other things can also serve as signs. Therefore, one and the same object can simultaneously manifest itself both as a thing in its own sense and a sign (St. Augustine, 2008, III, 6). Augustine distinguishes between natural ("in the natural sense, by the content") and conventional (interpreted as figurate, "figuratively" and "prophetically") signs (St. Augustine, 2008, III, 12). The natural or proper ones are used to denote things for which they were invented. The conventional signs are applied "when the things themselves which we indicate by the proper names are used to signify something else" (St. Augustine, 2008, II, 10).

One cannot deny the clarity and subtlety of this definition. It requires an understanding of the uniqueness of sign's meaning because the apparent multiplicity of meanings, under this definition, stems only from the fact that the very signifier of the sign, in turn, can act as a sign. This reveals an essential connection between the sign and signifier or meaning. The case of random coincidence referred to as homonymy is not an exceptionally rare phenomenon. Nonetheless, the homonyms substantially have not only different signifiers but also different signs. However, it does not mean that, conversely, a signifier (meaning), as a single content, cannot be expressed in different signs. According to Siefert (1999), this multiplicity of modes of expression (figure of speech, trails, and images,



etc.) is often mistaken for a plurality of signifiers.

In accordance with his understanding of the link between the sign and the object (thing), Augustine presents the following definition of a sign: “a sign is a thing which, over and above the impression it makes on the senses, causes something else to come into the mind as a consequence of itself” (St. Augustine, 2008, II, 1). In the other place, the treatise offers more explicit wording: “nor is there any reason for giving a sign except the desire of drawing forth and conveying into another's mind what the giver of the sign has in his own mind” (St. Augustine, 2008, II, 3). The second statement is not limited to a sign. It is much broader and includes the activity of signification. No less indicative is the fact that Augustine has shifted his focus from the act of signifying to the communicative relationship. Under the influence of signs, the listener's mind shapes into a living thought. It can be argued that to produce signs means to translate the meaning outside.

Augustine divides the notion of understanding into two parts. They are a way to find what one needs to understand and a way of expressing what has been understood. At the same time, there are two layers of understanding, namely profane and sacred. The author links them to the difference between meaning and sign. For him, it is important to understand the meaning of the Scriptures, not the value of separate expressions. The definition of the rules associated with an appropriate understanding is important. However, it is only the beginning of getting the meaning of the Scriptures. When the meaning is grasped, all of the



obscure and darkened passages may be fixed by bidirectional looking of the one that seeks knowledge and listens.

The relationship between the signs and objects is shown in the analysis of the ratio of the two most important types of actions or kinds of loving such as use and enjoyment. This distinction belongs entirely to the subject area. The articles intended for the use are transitive and similar to signs, while the articles for enjoyment are non-transitive (categories of transitive and intransitivity enable contrasting subjects and signs): to enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake. To use, on the other hand, is to employ whatever means are at one's disposal to obtain what one desires if it is a proper object of desire (St. Augustine, 2008, I, 4).

The distinction between things on the basis of transitive/intransitivity is important for theology. In the end, there is nothing but God worthy of enjoyment that can be loved for its own sake. The conclusion is that God is the only entity that is absolutely not the sign. Accordingly, any final signified entity (i.e., the one that can be signified, but does not signify anything) in the human culture is endowed with divine properties.

St. Augustine's Understanding of the Scriptures

The Bible is explained by Augustine substantially for its communicative



function. It serves as a means of enlightenment of mankind, i.e., means of transmission of information and meaning from God to man. The text of the Bible is an important source of information; it is the repository of knowledge about God and His Providence. The awareness of the symbolic nature of the biblical text prompted Augustine to engage in the systematic study of different ways to decode the meaning of the Scriptures, to search for an adequate understanding of what the biblical texts are trying to say and to discover their pragmatic value.

It was a fundamentally novel move in comparison to Antioch philology limited, in its analysis, to the textual research. The latter failed to take into account both the author's intention and the impact of increasingly changing social, cultural, religious, and historical contexts of the perception and understanding of the text as well as the set of potential responses of a reader to the obtained experience (Gough & Stables, 2012). In his hermeneutical theory, Augustine anticipates the latest linguistic doctrines. Jakobson (1979) highly valued his semiotic theory. According to Todorov (1984), Augustine performed a feat of a discoverer. What was seen before as the words in the framework of rhetoric or semantics, he distributed to all the signs? The words became only one of the many varieties (p. 50).

Augustine applies a number of presuppositions associated with his communicative-semiotic approach to the text of the Bible. He takes into account the canonical unity of both Testaments that have an integral impact on the reader and the universal Christological meaning of the



entire text revealing its multifacetedness. Finally, the author actually calls to consider the rootedness of a reader in a certain (church, cultural, social, and ethnic) tradition that strongly affects the person's commitment to understanding the meaning of the biblical revelation. In other words, Augustine offers to take into account what was later identified as pre-knowledge (in the philosophical system of Heidegger) or the substantial issue of the understanding of the text that largely determines the process and the result of its interpretation and understanding. Generally, it is a key point of Augustine's hermeneutics representing the process of interpretation and understanding of the communicative act, precisely, a sequence of such acts. According to van Fleteren (2004), it was for the first time in the history of this science, when a model of the hermeneutical process included the subject who is reflective of a text, along with the object of interpretation.

It can be argued that this is the main statement of the book. The subject is extracting meaning from the Scriptures and thereby converting the text from the condition of a passive object into an active communication partner of interpretation. Thus, Augustine was the first to realize that the proper understanding of the substance has to meet two major coordinates through the set of spiritual culture (objective of the continuum) and the individual will to extract the meanings or the free reflection of the interpreter. On the basis of these theoretical presuppositions and his own experience of reading and interpretation of the Scriptures, Augustine concludes that the Bible speaks about faith, hope, and love. These are the three words that represent the essence and

meaning of the entire Christian culture and teaching.

St. Augustine's Views on Christian Education and Teaching

From a broader perspective, the discussed treatise also covers the theme of education. In accordance with the spiritual and intellectual context and the interests of the then era, it is a Christian theological education aimed particularly at improving the understanding of the Scriptures. Nonetheless, the principles and concepts used by Augustine can be converted to a common Christian educational context.

Speaking of the Bible, Augustine considers it as a **database** of Christian theology. The data (the author uses the Latin term *res* standing for a **thing**) is opened by 'signs' (signa) contained in the Scriptures and is applied and distributed through the art of expression (eloquent). The Christian revelation is a collection of dogmatic truths that must be followed. This is the economy of salvation that reveals the love of God to man. In turn, the moral precepts, once executed, represent the love of man to God through the desire to follow the way of Christ (St. Augustine, 1978, III, 20). The purpose of the Christian life is love. It is superior to the Scriptures. Education increases this love.

As it was already mentioned, the books II and III of *On Christian Teaching* explain the way of understanding the text (St. Augustine, 2008, II, 1-6, 8).

Augustine emphasizes that the Scriptures are in need of proper interpretation. The latter requires a deep and comprehensive knowledge of various scientific disciplines. The understanding of the Christian truths must be based on real science and data that distance themselves from the false sciences (such as astrology). However, even a pseudoscience may contain true statements. These should rightfully be used by Christians. Augustine discusses in detail the need to work with the words by paying careful attention to the ambiguity of concepts. The famous Father of the Church shared the basics skills in giving a professional public speaker with his readers. The transfer of Christian knowledge is largely dependent on the available skills to deliver the word.

Two main features characterize the book IV of *On Christian Teaching* that was written thirty years later. It is likely to have been interrupted and subsequently appended for a reason. Augustine refers to the texts of the Scripture and the Fathers of the Church to state that the adequate transmission of doctrinal knowledge is often served not by the oratory skills but through the simplicity of words. Moreover, those who cannot pronounce the word correctly may appeal to the works of others and read them (St. Augustine, 2008, IV, 29).

Augustine makes the following statement that may help in solving the riddle related to the long pause before completing the book IV. The education, training, and the art of reproduction are definitely needed. At the same time, prayer is even more needed. It is the player who is capable of telling the truth, and the heart of the listener may gain the capacity to

accept and love this truth. Augustine returns to the doctrine of grace. It turns his treatise on Christian education into a wonderful combination of the dialectic of possible and impossible. It is the salvation, which is available to all, but delivered as a free gift from above and, therefore, inaccessible. The knowledge and edification affect and educate only through the gift of Christ (Gough & Stables, 2012). The text of *On Christian Teaching* is not only a premature desire of the author to compromise the two hermeneutics that does not coincide with each other in terms of time and content but also an attempt to provide asymmetric coordination between the metaphysical order and absolute anarchy of divine grace. This coordination aims to link the level of human freedom and action to the level of divine predestination, where the anarchy is the same as the order in the highest sense of the word, historically hidden from the human mind. It should also connect a temporary phenomenon, visible and active outside, with the eternal noumenon, acting flawlessly inside a person (Bright, 2005, pp. 73-74).

Discussion

The review answers the question of the central achievements of the discussed treatise. As it was shown, one can quite accurately say that the first semiotic ideas were expressed precisely by Augustine. He has a clear definition of the sign, the division of artificial and natural signs, and many logical ideas. With specific regard to hermeneutics, the author explicitly defines the fundamental hermeneutic category of understanding. He claims that understanding is the transition from the sign to the signifier,

during which one learns the meaning through imprinting the idea of the affecting sign in the soul. For Augustine, the method of grasping the meaning in dealing with signs is quite naturally psychological. As long as souls are related and similar to one another, they contact each other to understand the signs.

Also, the book contains the initial version of one of the most important principles of the hermeneutics and semiotics. It is the principle of the contextual approach, saying that one understands the signs not as isolated from each other but in a certain context. For Augustine, however, such a context is purely textual. Aiming to apply hermeneutics to the interpretation of the Bible, he adopts the principle of a contextual approach to meet his specific goals. According to the author, some passages of the Scriptures can be understood only in their environment. The claim to theoreticity of the principle may seem now quite timid, but, nevertheless, the attitude of the contextual approach is clearly expressed.

Augustine also uses another principle that is applied in the later hermeneutics. It is called the principle of congeniality, i.e., the proportionality of the creative potential of any researcher of the text and its creator. This principle appears in the form of identity of the divine inspiration of the author and reader. The meaning of certain passages of the Scriptures is accessible to a reader whose divine inspiration is equal to the divine inspiration of an author.

Augustinian definition of the sign is somewhat different from the modern



semiotic doctrine. Augustine believes that the signifier (meaning) can be comprehended completely and should be referred to as the context only in difficult cases. He asserts that each sign has a signifier, i.e., an exterior side, through which a person perceives signs as material objects, sensually perceived things. The outer side of the signs relates them to denoting objects. Also, there is an alleged inner side of the sign (signifier), which is the purpose of understanding. This chain of meaning, with the help of Leibniz and then de Saussure, Peirce, and Morris lived up to the 20th century. In the previous century, the semiotics entered a new stage, reinventing and replacing the Augustinian concept. The new approach to the semiotics claims the possibility of the following. It assumes the existence of major divisions, which seem to consist of signs, such as statements or texts in general. They are the bearers of semantic information. The smaller structural elements have no meaning. They can hardly perform the reference (indicating) function in the context of the larger meaningful units (van Fleteren, 2004). This is a very fruitful idea for the methodology of the humanities.

Furthermore, according to Augustine, common rhetoric is a subject of education, and, as such, it is not useless to the preacher, although not required. It would be sufficient for the preacher to explore the Scripture and ecclesiastical works of literature. Both the speaker and the preacher need wisdom. The one who can talk wisely is more suitable for preaching than the one capable of speaking eloquently. Augustine offers a doctrine of the low, medium, and high syllable. His essay is mainly formal homiletics. In other words, it is Christian rhetoric.



Conclusion

It took Augustine more than 30 years to finish the discussed book. It has become the first fundamental, consolidated work on the hermeneutics with major theological implications. Prior to it, there were only a few specific techniques and interpretations of particular passages from the Scriptures. In contrast, the latter introduced the theoretical summarizing approach that explicitly identified the principles that would be destined to live for the centuries up to the present day. They proved to have a critical value not in the sense of reverence for the authority of Augustine, but in terms of theoretical solidity.

The purely philological value of Augustine's work is enormous. He has compiled and brought together conceptually different ideas and entire areas of scientific knowledge, formerly fully autonomous. The result is a completely innovative theoretical approach to the problem of understanding and interpretation. The following are the main components of this synthesis.

Being a professional orator, Augustine first applies his knowledge to the interpretation of specific texts (the Bible). This way hermeneutics absorbs rhetoric. Together, they are complemented and explained under the logical theory of sign. *On Christian Teaching* treatise thereby combines two disciplines giving birth to the general theory of signs, or semiotics, which has found a proper place for the signs of the rhetorical tradition transformed in hermeneutic.



Augustine considers the text of the Scriptures as a collection of signs that have theological, historical, and moral value. Researching the methods of interpreting them, including the means of secular sciences, is the major theme of *On Christian Teaching*. It enables the author to argue for the credibility of his main statement about the substantial interdependence of reader and text, speaker and listener, a Christian and the Bible, and the Scriptures and mankind. In closing, the difference between this book and modern books on Christian education is very noticeable. Nowadays, one can rarely meet a writer who would work on the book for 30 years. Whereas Augustine's work is mainly devoted to signs, it has a sign in itself. The key to it is in the years he spent in prayer believing that the speaker would tell the truth and the listener would be granted an opportunity to understand and accept it.

