

MODERN-DAY THE MESTIZO AUGUSTINE: A THEOLOGIAN BETWEEN TWO CULTURES

A Book Review

Presented to

Dr. Haykin

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for 25235

by

Daniel Bradley Borwick

dborwick600@students.sbts.edu

December 13th, 2021

I affirm the honor code.

Gonzalez, Justo. *The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016.

The Mestizo Augustine is an ambitious biography of one of the Church's most influential Theologians: St. Augustine of Hippo. This book was written by Justo Gonzalez, an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church who also taught historical theology at the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico and the Candler School of Theology of Emory University.

Summary

The Mestizo Augustine is not like other biographies. In this work, Gonzalez seeks to look at Augustine from a unique perspective. This perspective is Augustine as a "mestizo". According to Gonzalez, a mestizo is "...a person in whom two cultures, two legacies, two world visions clashed and mingled" (9). Gonzalez gives a modern-day example of a mestizo as a Mexican-American. A Mexican-American boy can be raised in Texas surrounded by people of an Anglo-Saxon ethnicity where he is told that he is Mexican. But if that same boy were to go to Mexico City, he would be told he is an American. A mestizo is someone who belongs to two different realities or two different cultures, while at the same time, belongs to neither (13).

Gonzalez contends that much of Augustine's life, from his inner struggles to his gifted writing and speaking abilities, can be explained by Augustine belonging to two different cultures at the same time. These two cultures are Roman (from his Father), and Berber (North African

ethnicity from his mother).

Gonzalez's goal in writing is ambitious. In his own words, "...this is actually a call to read anew the entire history of the church and its theology from the perspective of mestizaje and the manner in which it points to the future" (18). The rest of the book seeks to prove two things: first, that Augustine was a mestizo, and second, that the entirety of Augustine's thought and theology is influenced by his status as a mestizo.

To first show that Augustine was a mestizo, we must first examine his familial origin. Augustine was born in Tagaste, North Africa in 354. Tagaste, at the time of Augustine's birth, was predominantly populated by Berber peoples, but occupied and controlled by Rome. Augustine's father was named Patrick and his mother was named Monica. Patrick was Roman and was employed by the Roman government while his mother was Berber in origin. One can start to see the mestizo developing in Augustine already.

To add to the mix of things, Gonzalez informs us that Augustine's father Patrick was pagan, with a possible bend towards Stoicism, while Monica was a devout Christian. This means that as Augustine was growing up in the home, he was constantly faced with the presence of Rome, with all of its heights and achievements, while also living in the presence of his submissive mother, who would often pray and speak of submitting to God above all else (31).

Gonzalez explains that much of Augustine's mestizo identity comes from his mother, Monica, who was also a mestizo of sorts. She saw in Augustine, from a very young age, much talent and gifting. Monica wanted him to grow into his Christian inheritance while also enjoying a successful career. Gonzalez compares this to many immigrants today who want their child to

inherit the values and customs of their native origin, while also “rising the ranks” so to speak in the American school and workforce.

Augustine’s parents gave what little money they had to help him through school in Tagaste, Madaura, and Carthage. What he studied would become invaluable to him later in his pastoral career: rhetoric. Once again, the mestizo-like blend of cultures between the Roman discipline of rhetoric being taught in North Africa can be easily spotted.

Thus far Gonzalez has shown that the city Augustine was born in had a mix of two cultures, Augustine’s own home had a mix of two cultures, his upbringing was mixed between those two cultures, and Gonzalez will soon show that Augustine’s thinking has been influenced by these two cultures: Greco-Roman and African.

Before showing the mestizo within Augustine’s Christian thought, Gonzalez dedicates time to shed light on Augustin’s thought pre-conversion. Augustine found the Christian faith of his mother to be intellectually untenable mainly due to what is commonly called the problem of evil. This problem drove Augustine to Manichaeism, which for a brief time, satisfied Augustin’s mind when he thought upon the nagging problem of pain and suffering in the world. Augustine felt like Manichaeism was “the truth” he had been searching for. It is worth noting that before this Manichaeism, Augustine also flirted with Stoicism and Skepticism. In the end, none of these intellectual endeavors proved lasting, sending Augustine back on a quest for the truth (37-39).

Gonzalez goes so far as to show that even Augustine’s conversion can be viewed from a mestizo lens. Augustine was living within the city of Milan when he got to hear the famous Bishop Ambrose preach. Before hearing Ambrose, Augustine still felt like the Christian

scriptures that his mother taught him were lacking philosophically, but that was about to change.

While Augustine was greatly impressed at the oratory skill of Ambrose, he was even more impressed by the quality of content that he was hearing. It was not how the words were being spoken that impacted him, it was what the words meant. He saw that the Christian faith was, at the very least, intellectually respectable. Gonzalez summarizes the event clearly with this:

“These words [Augustine’s recollection of Ambrose’s preaching] show how upon listening to Ambrose Augustine was able to join the Roman culture of his father to his mother’s faith” (44).

Gonzalez, thus far, has shown that Augustine’s upbringing, his childhood, and now his conversion can all be at least partially explained through the concept of mestizo. Gonzalez dedicates the rest of the book to examining how Augustine draws upon his mestizo status to respond to different controversies within the church. Those controversies would be Manichaeism, Donatism, and Pelagianism.

With Augustine’s former life as a Manichaean, it is no surprise that he would be one uniquely qualified to refute the now ancient religion. Gonzalez seems to make the point that because of Augustine’s Greco-Roman background (stemming from his father), he was attracted to such an intellectual system that many in the Greco-Roman world held to. On top of that, Manichaeans claimed to have “solved” the problem of evil, which made an even greater appeal to Augustine. Manichaeism seemed, at first, to be a rational belief system that could explain all mysteries of the universe. But upon further review, Augustine thought otherwise (86).

When it came to refuting the Manichaeans, Augustine drew heavily upon his Greco-Roman background. As stated earlier, Augustine at one point dabbled in the philosophy of

the Stoics. At the time of his writing against the Manichaeans, he was still swimming in Neoplatonist streams. It is from these traditions that Augustine drew for his refutations. Augustine made numerous references to evil not being a substance, but being a distance from the good (a very platonic thought). Augustine also appealed much to the freedom of the will when it comes to making good or evil decisions (touching on Stoicism). Because Augustine was deeply influenced by these Greco-Roman philosophies, he was able to “baptize” them and use them against the Manichaeans (96).

Augustine not only wrote against the Manichaeans, but he also wrote against the Donatists. To make a complex matter simple, Donatism was a theological schism in the third century that revolved around the nature of authority within the church and the holiness or purity of the church. Augustine (born after the schism even took place), enters the controversy later in his life and this is where he starts to write on the “visible” and “invisible” church (114). Gonzalez takes up this portion of Augustine’s life not necessarily to just recount the history of the matter but to show that Augustine drew upon his Roman heritage to answer the controversy. Augustine believed that authority does not reside in a person, but an office. If someone is appointed to be governor, he is governor until he is replaced, no matter the quality of his governing. But those of Berber descent would argue that the basis of authority was the ruler’s nature and character regardless of any held office. In the words of Gonzalez: “Augustine is affirming the Roman side of his own identity, preferring it over the Berber” (115).

At this point it may seem like Augustine pulled much from his Roman background to the expense of his African, Berber background. However, as Gonzalez is about to show, Augustine

pulls from his African background when confronting the Pelagians.

The Augustine-Pelagius controversy involved much disagreement, but the primary points of contention were the existence of original sin, the nature of the human will, and the doctrine of predestination. For Pelagius, for God to choose anyone before they were born was unjust. Pelagius, following in his Roman understanding of the law, believed that God sat underneath some sort of law just as the emperor of Rome sat underneath Roman Law. Augustine believed that Pelagius was limiting the power and the authority of God. While Augustine pulled from a Roman view of authority against the Donatists, he pulled from a North African point of view on authority against the Pelagians, believing that God, being the supreme ruler of the world, can do as he pleases with his created subjects. There is no law or authority above God for Augustine, God is the law and authority in and of himself. “It is this mestizaje that makes it possible for him to claim resources from one culture or the other, according to various needs and circumstances” (149).

Gonzalez, through the course of the book, sought to show that Augustine’s family of origin, his childhood, his education, his youthful philosophical meanderings, his conversion, his fights with the Manichaeans, the Donatists, and the Pelagians, can all be examined through the lens of his mestizaje.

Critical Evaluation

Gonzalez offers us much in the realm of historical theology. There are not many

Augustine biographies out there that give such a thorough, yet brief telling of his life while also offering a new lens through which to see Augustine. Gonzalez is right to be praised for his work for multiple reasons.

First, this concept of “mestizo” is entirely new to me and I’m sure will be new to many readers. Gonzalez did an excellent job explaining what a mestizo is. Gonzalez using the modern-day example of a Mexican-American as a mestizo helped drive the point home as to what a mestizo is (15). This book would be an enormous encouragement to many modern-day mestizos showing them that they too, like Augustine, can leave a deep impact on the Kingdom of God with their faithfulness no matter their ethnicity or ethnicities.

Second, I think Gonzalez has persuasively shown that Augustine was a mestizo. Gonzalez successfully showed the mestizaje of Augustine from his family of origin to his conversion to his thoughtful writings and refutations. Gonzalez convinced this reader that to miss Augustine’s mestizaje is to miss much of what makes Augustine Augustine.

While I feel confident that Gonzalez accomplished his goal of showing Augustine as a mestizo, I think Gonzalez failed at his primary goal. “This book is actually a call to read anew the entire history of the church and its theology from the perspective of mestizaje and of the manner in which it points to the future” (18). The reason Gonzalez failed at this goal is that it is entirely too lofty. We cannot take one single theologian, no matter how influential, show him to be a mestizo, and then say that all of church history is soaked in this mestizo concept. While this concept works for Augustine, I do not think it would work nearly as well for any theologian born to parents of one culture and one ethnicity.

While I know that Gonzalez believes the concept of mestizo to be utterly important in understanding Augustine (or else he would not have written this book), Gonzalez seems to forget the concept through much of the biography. Gonzalez's chapters on Augustine's path to the pulpit and the Manichaeans barely mentioned Augustine's mestizaje. I'm sure this was not intentional by Gonzalez but if mestizo is so important to understanding Augustine, how was he able to (excellently) explain these crucial points of Augustine's life without appealing to the concept? I am not the first writer to see this. Jose Torres, writing a review of the book for the *Journal of Religious History*, summarized my critique well: "...there are a couple portions where his analysis deviates from the mestizo rubric, and the reader loses sight of this interpretive motif. These moments beg the question: can the concept of mestizaje bear the weight of the whole of Augustine's life and witness?"¹ To answer the question for Torres, no, I do not think mestizaje alone can bear the weight of Augustine. Even though the concept is very helpful, it alone is not sufficient. Mark Clavier writing for the *Journal of Reformed Theology* noticed the same problem: "Most of what is found after the first chapter and before the final chapter makes little mention of the mestizo Augustine".²

One final critique can be offered here. Gonzalez takes little time to investigate how the concept of "ethnicity" was understood in the time of Augustine. To put it another way, would Augustine read this book and approve of how significant Gonzalez makes the concept of ethnicity? Would Augustine understand ethnicity in the same (hyper-modern) way that Gonzalez

¹ Jose F Morales Torres, "Justo L. González: The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures," *Journal of Religious History* 42, no. 1 (March 2018): 142, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12495>.

² Mark Clavier, "Justo L. González: The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 12, no. 3 (2018): 322, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697312-01203005>

does? I am not sure what the answer to that question would be, but if Gonzalez is essentially calling us to re-evaluate all of church history through this ethnic lens, shouldn't he take more time to evaluate how the theologians *themselves* understood their ethnicity? Mark Clavier (whom we mentioned earlier) posed the problem this way:

González makes no attempt to address how ethnicity might have been understood in a broadly classical and specifically GrecoRoman context. Nationality is a very modern concept, and how someone in fourth-century Roman Africa understood their identity is altogether different from the way a modern-day Cuban American would do so.³

Conclusion

While the mestizo lens offered by Gonzalez is incredibly unique and valuable, it is not strong enough to carry the massive theological titan that is Augustine. Nonetheless, I found this book to be an incredible introduction to the famous theologian. Gonzalez takes massive topics and writings from Augustine and synthesizes them down to an easily readable book. After reading, I feel that I have been introduced to Augustine in a concise yet thorough way. I'm sure many other readers would feel the same, and for that, I would recommend it to anyone looking to understand this complex mestizo theologian.

³ Clavier, "The Mestizo Augustine," 322.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Clavier, Mark. "Justo L. González: The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures." *Journal of Reformed Theology* 12, no. 3 (2018): 321-322. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697312-01203005>

Morales Torres, Jose F. "Justo L. González: The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures." *Journal of Religious History* 42, no. 1 (March 2018): 136-137. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12495>.

*I have written this paper exclusively for 25235. If I received any editing or proofreading advice, I have made all such corrections myself. I have also documented each paraphrase, direct quotation, and borrowed idea in compliance with the Turabian and SBTS style manuals.