

CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

In his new book, *The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures*, the renowned historian and theologian Justo González looks at the life and legacy of Augustine from the perspective of what Latino/a theology calls *mestizaje*, which means being of a mixed background. Seeing Augustine as both Roman and African helps to shed light on his theology and his significance for today. Recently the IVP editor for the project, David Congdon, had a chance to speak with the author about his work.



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You are well-known for your highly praised surveys of Christian history, the three-volume *History of Christian Thought* and two-volume *The Story of Christianity*. What motivated you to focus on Augustine of Hippo?

GONZÁLEZ: In many ways, I have focused on Augustine for many years, for it is impossible to study the history of Western Christian theology without focusing on him. After all, no one since the apostle Paul has had a greater influence on the course of Christian theology than has Augustine. At the same time, Augustine's own prestige has made him a focus of many later controversies, for all sides claimed his authority in their favor. Probably the most important example is the time of the Protestant Reformation, when both Roman Catholics and Protestants claimed—and were convinced—that their views had the support of Augustine. And, to make things even more interesting, they were both right!

This book was originally published in Spanish. Who was the original audience, and who do you have in mind in publishing this English translation?

GONZÁLEZ: The book grew out of the repeated experience of talking with Latinos and Latinas who were having a hard time dealing with issues of identity. Many of them were away from the lands of their parents, and unable to return to them—sometimes for political reasons, sometimes over immigration issues, and most often because in truth the lands of their parents had changed so much that they no longer

existed. There was within them a struggle between the legacy they wished to affirm and the reality in which they lived. And they were not comfortable in either of the two.

Can you explain what *mestizo* and *mestizaje* mean? How do these terms from Latino/a theology help us to understand Augustine better?

GONZÁLEZ: The situation I have just described is what Latina and Latino theologians refer to when they speak of *mestizaje*. In Spanish, the word *mestizo* has traditionally been a pejorative term, referring to those who are a mixture of more than one race. The word itself, *mestizo*, is derived from *mixed*. Its meaning was very similar to the English term “half-breed.” Being a *mestizo* was something of which to be ashamed.

But during the last century, due mostly to the work of Mexican politician and author José de Vasconcelos and of the Catholic Mexican-American theologian Virgilio Elizondo, the meaning of the word began to change. It still refers to the condition of belonging to two traditions, cultures, and contexts, and at the same time belonging to none. But now it has become a matter of pride, something to be affirmed, on the premise that it is precisely where cultures meet that creativity is most apparent.

Augustine himself was a *mestizo*. His mother was African. His father was Roman. His mother wanted him to accept and follow her Christianity, which had African overtones. But she also wanted him to move ahead in the world, which required him to become as Roman as possible. (Note that all of this is similar to the experience of many immigrants whose parents want them to remain loyal to their cultural legacy, but also to become sufficiently at home in their new setting to be able to move ahead in society.)

This is so similar to what I have heard in countless conversations that I am convinced that it provides an important clue to understand Augustine, and also that it provides valuable insights for people struggling with the issues of their own *mestizaje*.



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Can you give an example of how Augustine, being a man “between two cultures,” makes sense of his response to a theological controversy?

GONZÁLEZ: Certainly, but you will have to read the book to understand my examples more fully. At the time of the Donatist controversy what was at stake was not just the series of theological issues that I have repeatedly described elsewhere, but also two conflicting views of authority, its origin, and its validity. In this controversy

Augustine opted for the Roman rather than for the African understanding of authority. But then, in the Pelagian controversy, his views so reflected his African heritage that his enemies called him “the African Aristotle.”

We are accustomed to viewing Augustine as the great theologian of the Latin West, but you refer to him as a shepherd in the book and focus on his pastoral responsibilities. Why is this important?

GONZÁLEZ: The best theology is pastoral theology—by which I do not mean only what seminary curricula often call “pastoral theology,” but a theological outlook that develops in a pastoral context and in dealing with pastoral issues. If one compares Augustine’s writings before he was forced to become a pastor with those he wrote after his ordination, the first are solid disquisitions worthy of intellectual praise, but the latter are the most influential, for in them he is not dealing merely with his own intellectual concerns but rather with the needs of his flock—not just his local flock in Hippo, but the church at large. Without the pastoral responsibilities that I mention and outline, Augustine’s theology would probably have been very similar to the mostly speculative treatises that he wrote almost immediately after his conversion.

This book is clearly more than a mere historical presentation of Augustine. You speak of him as a “lens for Western

Christianity.” Why is it important to understand Augustine in a fresh way today? What can he teach the contemporary church in North America?

GONZÁLEZ: Perhaps we should begin with the negative side of being a “lens.” Western Christianity has become so captivated by Augustine that even those who have never heard his name still read the New Testament through the eyes of Augustine. Once we realize that these are the lenses we are wearing, we may rediscover elements in early Christian theology that Augustine’s influence has obscured. Tinted glasses may be good, but one must not forget that one is looking at reality through them. On the positive side, it was Augustine who—perhaps in part because he was a *mestizo* and his theology reflected it—was able to preserve much of Christian heritage as a new *mestizaje* was developing in Western Europe. Western civilization was born out of a *mestizaje* between the Roman and the Germanic. And one of the most significant influences leading that new *mestizaje* was that of Augustine, himself a *mestizo*.

How does this book connect to the work you are doing today on behalf of Hispanic theological education?

GONZÁLEZ: It connects in many ways. Three of these are foremost in my mind. One is that it reaffirms the commonly expressed theme in Hispanic theology that one can produce very valuable theology in which the condition of *mestizaje*, rather than a handicap, is

an advantage or a valuable hermeneutical lens. To have Augustine as a predecessor is no mean thing!

Second, I hope it will strengthen the resolve of the upcoming generation of Latino and Latina theologians and scholars not to succumb to the pressures of an academic world that often values abstract speculation over theological reflection firmly grounded in the life of the church. If Augustine did it, perhaps they too can do it!

Third, I hope it will show others that the work that Latina and Latino scholars and theologians do, which reflects their often confused cultural heritage, may well be all the more valuable precisely because it reflects that sort of heritage. Perhaps I would even say, “If you don’t like *mestizo* theology, please go and complain to Augustine!”

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