The *De peccatorum meritis* and
Augustine’s rejection of pre-existence

In his article, ‘St. Augustine’s criticism of Origen in the *Ad Orosium*’¹ R.J. O’Connell throws out the suggestion that the dating of the *De peccatorum meritis* is considerably later than 412, the date that is usually given. He suggests 415. One feels that this suggestion must be thrown out in a rare unguarded moment, since to redate this work would involve a re-dating of the entire anti-Pelagian corpus. This suggestion however, does lead us to re-examine the date and the *Sitz im Leben* of the work to see how this improves our understanding of Augustine’s rejection of his earlier beliefs about the pre-existence of the soul.

In the first instance it must be conceded that O’Connell is correct in suggesting that to date the work on the basis of *Ep. 139* is inexact. But there is more evidence than this alone.

The doctrinal context is certainly later than the Council of Carthage in 411 with its condemnation of Coelestius². It was as a result of this that Marcellinus raised issues with Augustine, the content of which must be gleaned from the book, but which appear to have been as follow:

a) That Adam would have died even had he not sinned (cf Coelestius’ thesis 1)³.

b) That mortality does not extend to the whole of humanity from Adam. (cf theses 4 and 2)⁴.

c) That it is possible for a human being to be sinless (cf. thesis 6)⁵.

d) That Adam only harms us as exemplar⁶ (Presumably a development from the theses but see further below.).

e) That Christ saves us equally as exemplar⁷. This was presumably developed from the imitationist theory of original sin at d) above.

f) That infants are not baptised to the end that they obtain eternal life but in order that they enter the kingdom⁸.

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3. *De pecc.* 1. 2.
4. *De pecc.* 1. 9 ff.
5. *De pecc.* 2. *passim*.
6. *De pecc.* 1. 15 eg.
7. *De pecc.* 1. 19.
8. *De pecc.* 1 *passim*. 
This last opinion is presumably an expansion of the additional opinion of Coelestius mentioned by Marius Mercator, that unbaptised infants dying have eternal life. If this is the case, and yet infant baptism is to continue, then this would be a probable theological justification. The relationship of Augustine's work to the theses condemned at the council would appear clear, despite the development and the shift of emphasis. This may lead us to ask at whose hands this development has taken place, but first, account must be taken of Refoulé's view that the distinction between eternal life and the Kingdom was in fact Augustine's own, a rationalisation of the argument that infants are not in need of salvation. This must in turn be treated in the light of Refoulé's claim that the De pecc. is a response to the Liber De fide of Rufinus the Syrian.

Books are explicitly alluded to in 1. 64 and 3.12, and there is an apparent quotation in 1. 58, apart from numerous hints passim that his opponents have set down a case in writing. Refoulé builds up an impressive case for the employment of the De fide, but not one for its exclusive use. So, eg, he compares 1. 58 with De fide 48. The citation is not, however, to be found at that point, and one would hardly expect Augustine to manufacture a quotation to bolster his own rationalisation of his opponents' views.

Then there is the conversation alluded to at 3.12. This refers to sanctification. If Augustine is in the business of rationalising his opponents' views, would he not rationalise this conversation as well?

Finally, to attribute such a process to Augustine would necessitate attributing to him the other developments from Coelestius' theses which are suggested above. This is surely too much.

This is not meant to rule out use of the De fide, although we shall not have reference to it since O'Connell has claimed that the assertion that Augustine possessed a copy in 411 rests at least partly on the early dating of the De pecc. We have however, as if there were ever any doubt, established the doctrinal context with regard to the Council of Carthage in 411. The conversation alluded to in 3.12 has reference to that council and Augustine's presence in Carthage. How long is parvum tempus? Not six years, surely.

With further regard to books with which issue is taken, there are close links with Pelagius' own writings, which Augustine did not possess until he came to write the third book of the De pecc., a separate production from the other two. There is not only the idea of Adam as exemplar but the apparently absurd exegesis of Romans 8:10 with which issue is taken at 1.6 is in fact that of Pelagius in Expositiones in Romanos. Then again, the opinion that parents cleansed of original sin cannot pass on that sin to their offspring.

13. « Exemplo vel forma »: Exp. in Rom. 5:12.
14. Exp. in Rom. 8:10.
is mentioned at 2.11, cf. Expositiones at 5:15. Martinetto suggests that this is a quotation from Coelestius\(^\text{15}\).

Thus we are pointed back again to Coelestius and his circle. Apart from the De fide, Augustine is taking issue either with the libellus produced by Coelestius at Carthage\(^\text{16}\), or else, given the developments and shift of emphasis noted above, another book, again produced at Carthage. In either event the controversy surrounds the teaching of Coelestius and the findings of the council, and in an excited atmosphere it would hardly take five years for opinions to grow and to reach the ears of Marcellinus.

Augustine states that the issues raised by Marcellinus call for an urgent reply and so distract him from the turmoil in which he is already involved. This reference surely implies that there is still heat in the Donatist controversy\(^\text{17}\), indeed the situation is urgent surely in that there is an implicit threat to his theology of baptism as worked out against the Donatists\(^\text{18}\).

Thus the whole Sitz im Leben for the first two books of the De pecc. point to the date of 412, and that is the light in which we must examine what La Bonnardière reads as Augustine’s first rejection of Origenism\(^\text{19}\).

The context is one in which Augustine has been arguing the necessity of baptism for salvation, and the corresponding condemnation accruing to the unbaptised. This obliges him to explain how it is that some come to die without baptism whereas others are made righteous. This he locates in the inscrutable nature of the will of God. Since grace is in any case undeserved, it cannot be considered unjust if some of, as opposed to all of, the undeserving receive it\(^\text{20}\).

Apart from the difficulty of locating the solution to a difficult problem in the mysterious nature of the will of God\(^\text{21}\), there is a further issue. Augustine has already admitted that

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\item\(^{16}\) De pecc. orig. 21. There are references to other works of Coelestius in De gratia Christi 31, 32 and 36, De perfectione justitiae hominis II, and Gennadius De scriptoribus ecclesiasticis, but none of these clearly relate to this controversy. It is this that inclines me towards the view that the book is one produced by Carthaginian Christians in support of Coelestius, apart from the evidence adduced by Augustine himself and the apparent Carthaginian bent of its preoccupations.
\item\(^{17}\) De pecc. 1.1.
\item\(^{19}\) See note 12 above.
\item\(^{20}\) De pecc. l. 29.
\item\(^{21}\) The will of God is used in Civ. Dei in such a way in a number of places (5.22, 12.15, 12.28, 18.18, 20.1, 2). A sceptic like Michael Goulder might well ask as he does in Why Believe in God? (With John Hick) London 1983) « What sort of a God is it who puts the names of young soldiers on the nails of an IRA bomb? The inscrutable wisdom of God is justly felt to be an evasion. »
\end{itemize}
infants commit no personal sin, and so there is a problem of apparent justice with regard to their condemnation, despite his qualification of that condemnation with omni tum minime. Again it is the inscrutable nature of God's will, and in illustration of this Augustine provides us with two examples. One is that of two good people, one baptised, the other not. The other example is of two infants, both baptised, one of whom dies and so enters the Kingdom, the other of whom survives to be an impious man. All this is a cause of wonder, not of quibbling. And this is the point at which he turns his attention to the theory that souls are incarnated as punishment for sin committed in a former state.

He argues against this, citing Romans 9:1-12. Those who are unable to give answer to this are only able, he says, to exclaim in their defence 'O Altitudo!' Oddly enough, this Pauline exclamation is precisely that of Augustine to the inscrutability of the judgement of the God who condemns the personally innocent. This is hardly calculated to bring one to Augustine's side.

Then, more interestingly still, just as in the chapter above, he goes on to cite the example of two diverse people. One is of good disposition, but does not chance to hear the Gospel preached. The other is licentious, of baser passions, but on hearing the Gospel is baptised and saved. How, it is asked, did the two come to acquire such different issues. Did not the better deserve better, and the worse, worse?

But apart from the fact that this argument pre-supposes its conclusion, that baptism is essential for salvation, there is no suggestion that the man of better disposition is actually concerned to return to his originate principles, whereas the second simply proves the point that incarnation is not simply retributive, but is a punishment which gives the opportunity for self-improvement through the exercise of free-will. The point is missed. Is it missed deliberately?

The argument, however, is not finished. For now he turns his attention to the case of simpletons, those who have no mentis lumen... quorum nomen moriones vulgus appellat. Those who accept the assumptions behind the theory of pre-existence would credit their souls to have been of great sinfulness to deserve such a body and such passions. And yet he notes the particular case of one who was a Christian, in spite of his grosser nature.

This works both against the neo-Platonists and the Carthaginian Coelestians alike. It demonstrates that salvation is not a matter of mental ability, nor of understanding, but of grace. The Platonists would not be able to accept that one such as this could achieve salvation; one such as this would be unable to digest the doctrina by which Pelagius believed that the soul was cleansed.

Ultimately then the argument is satisfactorily defeated, but the question remains as to why it was introduced in the first place, since it did not arise naturally from the text. It cannot be a response to the De fide since pre-existence is roundly condemned in that work. If it were a response to Coelestius that begs the question as to why it is that we have no further evidence of Coelestius as an Origenist. It is intrinsically unlikely that there was an Origenistic party in Carthage, and even if there were, there remains the question.

22. l. 22.
23. l. 21.
24. Pelagius Exp. in Ephesos 5:26: « Aqua lavit corpus animam doctrina mundavit ».
25. De fide IV 27 (PL 48 465-466).
as to why the other side of the Origenistic coin, universalism, is not dealt with. The only answer left, and that which causes fewest problems, is that we have an example of Augustine arguing with himself.

The Saint had been exercised with the problem of the condemnation of personally innocent infants on the ground of their original sin alone, and this could be solved through the neo-platonist system. So, to take the examples set in c30, the infant dying unbaptised would not thereby be excluded from salvation, the brevity of its life and suffering would indicate that there had been little evil to purge, whereas the one surviving would demonstrate the evil inherent in his soul as it emerged in later life. Augustine seeks a neo-platonist way out of his problem, but it is abandoned, not without much tortuous argument, on the grounds that grace is thereby excluded.26

Although the question seems to come from nowhere, there have already been warnings of a neo-platonist approach. In dealing with original sin Augustine must treat of the fall: it is described in c21 as the loss by the body of the capacity to be obedient to the soul. The idea implied here, that the body will turn to sin unless the soul command it, has echoes of Plotinus' psychology. So in Enn 3.1.1 and 4.7.1. the soul uses the body as a tool. In 4.3.21 it is the pilot of the ship of the body. Whilst in 4.4.18 and 19 the soul manages the body, deriving from its managerial function the fall is described in 4.8.7 as the result of an over-involvement in the body's affairs.

Plotinian psychology is not an activity in which one can involve oneself without reference to the fall of the soul. The treatment of the fall reawakens a whole train of thought in Augustine. O'Connell shows the way in which, in De Gen. contra Man. the treatment of the fall is thoroughly Plotinian.27

This treatment is less thorough, but no less neo-platonist. The idea of a corpus coeleste employed in the De Gen. contra Man. may be seen as the picture of a body entirely obedient to the soul. Such a notion may make sense of the picture of Enoch and Elijah in De pecc. 1. 3, in heaven and yet not redeemed.

In fact, the question remains as to whether this is indeed Augustine's first explicit rejection of the doctrine of pre-existence. Pre-existence itself is not even criticised, only the idea of incarnation as punishment. At 3. 18 and 1. 69 he forbears from any enquiry into the origin of the soul, and yet at 1. 69 pre-existence gets an honourable mention. At 1. 38 he suggests an exegesis of John 1: 9 that would involve the inner man coming into the body.28 And after all he has said on the mortiones he uses in 1. 37 the idea of internal illumination, unseen by those ab stultitiae tenebris. Even so, having criticised the view of incarnation as punitive as excluding the operation of grace, Augustine must explore the whole doctrine of pre-existence over again.

With regard to the question of when he became aware of the Origenist controversy we are left with something of an argumentum e silentio. The theory is described as explosum repudiatumque when it is introduced at 1. 31. He would be aware that the theory is Origen's from the De fide, and yet the fact that the theory is criticised in a work that he considers heterodox would hardly constitute sufficient grounds for him to abandon the thesis himself.

26. As noted by O'Connell, « The Plotinian Fall of the Soul in St. Augustine », Traditio 19 (1963) 1-36 (p. 15).
28. « (The light)... inluminat omnem hominem venientem in corpus »...
But then again the question becomes less significant, because in the *De pecc.* we have found Augustine producing his own argument in 412, on the basis of grace. It does not matter how much he knew about the Origenist controversy. What is significant is that Origenism and Pelagianism are linked in his mind at an early stage. Enter Orosius.

A final point. Augustine remained tortured by the idea of the condemnation of the innocent until 415 at least\(^{29}\). In following his thought in this work we gain an insight into the way in which his creative mind struggled to find the view which in time became his own.

Alistair C. Stewart
The Queen’s College,
Birmingham B15 2QH
UK

**RÉSUMÉ :** R.J. O’Connell a émis l’idée que le *De peccatorum meritis* était postérieur à 411/412. Cet article défend la datation traditionnelle en réexaminant les œuvres que saint Augustin combat, notamment les passages considérés comme un rejet de l’Origénisme. Il conclut que le passage sur la pré-existence n’est pas une réfutation d’Origène, mais un refus propre au Saint de considérer l’incarnation de l’âme comme une punition, étant donné la prééminence de la grâce.

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