

Augustine from Supporter to Opposer of Universal Restoration By Ilaria Ramelli

Saint Augustine in the Twenties of the fifth century was engaged in his polemic against Pelagianism, which he and others mistakenly believed to have been inspired by Origen's thought. In this context, he felt the need to oppose Origen's ideas and in particular rebuked "those merciful Christians who refuse to believe that torments in hell will be eternal."¹ Among these, Origen was "the most merciful of all" in that he even hypothesized the eschatological salvation of the devil.² Augustine had been misinformed (also by Orosius' *Commonitorium*) about Origen's exact doctrine of restoration; he was convinced that Origen had taught "unending shifts between misery and beatitude, and the infinite fluctuation between these states" (*CD* 21:17).³ On the contrary, Origen thought that these vicissitudes will definitely come to an end with the end of all aeons, in the eventual universal restoration.

Here Augustine insisted that suffering in hell will be eternal and that it is a Platonic and Origenian mistake to understand it as limited.⁴ Augustine, who knew little or no Greek, was unaware that "*aeternus* fire" in Latin translated Greek "αἰώνιον fire," which means, not "eternal fire," but "otherworldly fire." In Latin, both αἰώνιος and ἄϊδιος were rendered with *aeternus*, which generated a terrible confusion that surely facilitated the birth of the idea of "eternal" punishments in hell, whereas in Scripture only life and beatitude are said to be eternal proper (ἄϊδιος), while fire, death, and punishments are just "otherworldly" (αἰώνια).⁵ Because of his unawareness, Augustine in his *To Orosius* (5:5; 8:10) argued that the fire of hell is "eternal", otherwise the eternal beatitude of the just could not be eternal.⁶ Thus, falling in the same linguistic mistake, in *De gest. Pel.* 1:3:10 Augustine declares that the Church does well to criticize Origen and his followers who think that "the torment of the damned will end at a certain point, while the Lord called it 'eternal' [*aeternum*]."

But many years earlier, when the target of Augustine's polemic was not yet the Pelagianism, but rather Manichaeism, Augustine used against the latter the same metaphysical arguments that Origen used against "Gnostics."⁷ This, especially in his double treatise *On the Customs of the Catholic Church and on the Customs of the Manichaeans*.⁸ It is not accidental that in this same work Augustine also embraced the doctrine of universal restoration, whether he knew that it was Origen's or not. For in *De mor.* 2:7:9 he declared: "God's goodness [*Dei bonitas*] . . . orders all creatures [*omnia*] that have fallen . . . until they return to the original state from which they fell." This is the very same notion that Origen had expressed in *Princ.* 1:6:1, which may have reached Augustine in a compilation or partial translation anterior to Rufinus': "God's goodness [*bonitas Dei*], by means of his Christ, calls back all creatures [*universam creaturam*] to one and the same end."⁹ God's goodness, for both Origen and the young Augustine, is not simply God's kindness or generosity or mercy, but first and foremost, on the ontological plane, it is God's being the absolute Good, and since God is the true Being, evil, which is opposite to God the Good, is nonbeing. As Augustine

¹ *De gest. Pel.* 1:3:9.

² See also *C. Iul.* 5:47 and 6:10, in which Augustine refutes the thesis of the eventual conversion and salvation of the devil, ascribing this idea to Origen. He does not even take into consideration that it was rather Gregory of Nyssa who supported it with more decision than Origen.

³ In *De haer.* 43 Augustine—equally unfoundedly—accuses Origen of teaching an infinite sequence of aeons in which the devil will be purified and rational creatures will fall again and again, with no end.

⁴ PL 31:1211–6 = CSEL 18:151–7. See also *De haer.* 43, in which Augustine insists that Origen learnt the doctrine of universal salvation from the Platonists. It must be noticed that Plato himself did *not* believe in universal salvation.

⁵ See Ramelli and Konstan, *Terms for Eternity*, new edition, 47–80.

⁶ This is the same argument as presented in the passage included in Basil's monastic rules in the form of questions and answers, which is probably interpolated. Origen had already refuted it in his *Commentary on Romans*, where he demonstrated that, if life is eternal, death cannot possibly be eternal.

⁷ See my "Origen and Augustine."

⁸ PL 32:1309–78; ed. J. B. Bauer CSEL 90, 1992.

⁹ God's goodness is also at the center of *Comm. in Io.* 6:57: the eventual universal submission to Christ must be understood as universal salvation because only this will be "worthy of the goodness of the God of the universe."

explains in the rest of the passage at stake (*De mor.* 2:7), the creatures that have fallen are precisely rational creatures, who, with their free choices, acquire merits or demerits. On the basis of these, God assigns them to different orders—in Origen’s view, the orders of angels, humans, and demons—all the while never abandoning them and never allowing them to end up with disappearing in evil-nonbeing. God’s Providence guides these creatures until they return to the original condition from which they have fallen.

This whole passage is so replete with Origen’s ideas that Augustine felt the need to disavow it in his *Retractations*: “That all beings will return to the condition from which they fell should not be understood in the sense of Origen’s theory . . . for those who will be punished in the eternal fire do not return to God, from whom they detached themselves” (1:7:6). Given the closeness of Augustine’s thought to Origen, at least in his anti-Manichaean phase, it is not surprising that a collection of texts from Origen’s *On First Principles* has been ascribed to Augustine under the title *On the Incarnation of the Logos to Ianuarius*.