

**Who converts who in the *Confessions* of
Saint Augustine of Hippo.
Variations on the theme of *conuersio*.**

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One might be, and quite rightly so, somewhat apprehensive at reading a title for yet another work, however short, about the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine of Hippo. Could there still be anyone out there who could be led to believe that anything not yet known could be forged on the anvil of Augustinianism at all? And, to add to the academic affrontery, the chances of discovering anything unsaid with regards to the *Confessions* of the Saint, might seem, to say the least, yet bleaker! That is the reason why the present modest contribution can quite rightly be described as an attempt at a fresh reading, or a re-reading, of some of the rather very well known conversion incidents strewn all along the thirteen books of the *Confessions* with regards to some of the notorious actors that are involved.

The primary task in this direction would therefore have to be that of defining, as clearly and as precisely as possible, the term *conuersio*. In order that one might express better some of the nuances involved in the analysis of the term, the attempt would have to adopt the widest possible parameters for the definition of the term; in this case, if the enunciated thesis holds, those parameters adopted by Augustine himself. This does not mean that we shall attempt to twist, or bend, or adjust the meaning of the term to fit the proposal; at least allowing not more than has been

understood and allowed by the majority of those who put their hands to the task of an analysis and definition of the term *conuersio* in the *Confessions*.

Around the term *conuersio* there has accumulated a surprisingly acknowledged and variegated number of accessions. This contribution does not intend to go into the immense task of providing a bibliographical or semantic apparatus to discuss the accepted accessions for the Latin term *conuersio* in classical antiquity, be it pagan or Christian. The wisest thing to do, therefore, would be to refer readers to an immensely valid and useful article on the term *conuersio* worked out by Goulven Madec in his contribution to the *Augustinus-Lexikon*.¹ This French, Paris-based Augustinian Assumptionist, can undoubtedly be considered to be one of the most prolific writers on Augustine, and who wields perhaps an undisputed knowledge of Augustine and his works.

In the third section of his article on *conuersio*, Madec too acknowledges explicitly that today it would be definitely better to speak, not of one single definitive conversion of Augustine, but of a plurality of conversions undergone by this great Saint throughout his life. However, this is still not the proposed aim of the present article, as there have been many valid contributions which analyzed and discussed the details of each of Augustine's subsequent conversions! Thus, one of the major elements in the *status quaestionis* for the present contribution would be that of asking whether there could be some other way of going about the task of defining the term *conuersio*? I am not so sure whether, in my readings on Augustine, I have ever come across any contribution, with regards to the *Confessions*, in which any author ever actually hinted or wrote, about yet another variation on the theme of conversion, namely, that brought about by Augustine himself in the life of a good number of

1. "Conuersio", in: *Augustinus-Lexikon* vol.1 fasc. 7/8: *Ciuitas dei – Conuersio*, Schwabe Verlag & Co. AG, Basel 1994, 1282-1294. The following works ought to suffice by way of citing a few of the more renowned works on the topic of the conversion, or conversions, of St. Augustine, namely: Robert J. O'Connell, SJ, *Images of Conversion in St. Augustine's Confessions*, Fordham University Press, New York 1996; Franco Bolgiani, *La conversione di s. Agostino e l'VIII libro delle "Confessioni"*, Torino 1956; Leo C. Ferrari, *The Conversions of Saint Augustine*, The Saint Augustine Lecture 1982, Villanova University, Augustinian Institute, Villanova PA, USA; Robert, A. Markus, *Conversion and Disenchantment in Augustine's Spiritual Career*, The Saint Augustine Lecture 1984, Villanova University, Augustinian Institute, Villanova PA, USA; Leo C. Ferrari, *The Conversions of Saint Augustine*, The Saint Augustine Lecture 1982, Villanova University, Augustinian Institute, Villanova PA, USA; Colin Starnes, *Augustine's Conversion. A Guide to the Argument of Confessions I-IX*, Wilfred Laurier University Press, Ontario, Canada 1990; M.-A., Vannier, "Creatio", "Conuersio", "Formatio" chez s. Augustin, Fribourg 1991.

dramatis personae about whom he speaks, or who were actually involved, in this renowned masterpiece of his. At the end of the day, should the thesis proposed prove to be plausible, this work of Augustine would indeed truly deserve to be considered as the result of an inter-play of *conversion* narratives.

One of the very first incidents that could lend itself to further exploration with regards to the theme of conversion in the *Confessions*, is Augustine's narrative of the various attempts of his in *converting* a very close and intimate friend of his youthful days. Augustine himself had very recently fallen prey, or converted, to another wayward activity, namely an inordinate attachment to astrology and divination. This state of exterior waywardness, resulting in an inordinate attachment to astrology, is made to coincide, to correspond and to result in an interior state of confusion of mind, heart and affections. Augustine's well-known attachment to, and appreciation of friendship, is the area of his life which is affected by this weakness thanks to which he has been drawn towards astrological divinations. The way in which in the fourth book of his *Confessions* Augustine describes the stages in the process of his attempts to convert this close friend of his to this activity, is at one and the same time a movement towards friendship, carnal worldly attraction towards a person, but which, at the same time, is also described as a movement away, from another friendship, with God: "*He was not such a friend to me as he was to become later, though even at the later time of which I speak our union fell short of true friendship, because friendship is genuine only when you bind fast together people who cleave to you through the charity poured abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us.*"² This is, after all, typical of the entire narrative in the *Confessions*, it is a kind of movement which he had already described at the very outset of book four: "*were seduced and seducers...*"³

The crux of the whole text of this incident is attained by Augustine in the description of the way he tried to deviate, convince out of, and convert this converted unnamed friend of his from true faith: "*for I lured him from the true faith...to the superstitious and baneful fables...*"⁴ Augustine had, therefore, by now, become a convinced Manichee as well as an *apostle* of Mani. This incident

2. *Confessions* 4,4,7: CCL 27,43: "*sed nondum erat sic amicus, quamquam ne tunc quidem sic, uti est uera amicitia, quia non est uera, nisi cum eam tu agglutinas inter haerentes sibi caritate diffuse in cordibus nostris per spiritum sanctum, qui datus est nobis*". See Rom 5,5.

3. *Ib.* 4,1,1: CCL 27,40: "*seducebamur et seducebamus...*".

4. *Ib.*: "*deflexeram eum in superstitiosas fabellas et perniciosas...*".

could be appropriately, and quite rightly, considered in the light of an exercise in the proselytizing activity in favour of the new faith he had recently adhered to, Manichaeism.⁵

That element which could also be considered as the consecrating element of the topic of *conversion*, or *conversions*, in the life of Augustine, is not missing either, the omnipresence of his mother. Even in this different activity of Augustine, of converting others, Monnica is there, in the background, deploring and disapproving of this new missionary activity of her wayward son. Towards the end of book three, Augustine himself had acknowledged his devoted attachment and eagerness towards this new form of proselytizing activity of his, tormenting plenty of unskilled persons with finicky little questions.⁶

The reaction and the way in which that heavenly sent voice, through the person of the bishop-oracle whom Monnica had consulted in an attempt to have him try and have a word with, and maybe convince, her son Augustine out of that heresy, but who had wisely enough stood fast in his refusal to meet her Manichaean son, is also worthy of note. Most probably he had very wisely kept well in his mind the incident of how his mother had not only allowed herself to be led astray by the Manichees, but also the fact that she had then led him to them for instruction and conversion. No wonder that he now very cautiously refuses Monnica's plea to him to meet her son and attempt: "*to talk to me, to rebut my errors, and eventually disabuse me of my harmful persuasions and teach me good ones...*"⁷ Augustine's powers of persuasion, and not simply rhetorical ones, were by now very well known and acknowledged, and that saintly bishop certainly was very cautious not to expose himself, or his powers of Christian persuasion, too much, most probably remembering also of his, and his mother's fate.

The other episode which seems to lend itself to the interpretation that in the

5. There can be little room for doubt that the incident can also be seen in the light of Augustine's plea and defense of the efficacy of the sacrament of baptism administered to his friend: "*and as hope for his recovery dwindled he was baptized without his knowledge...irrespective of any rite performed on his unconscious body*": Conf. 4, 4, 8: CCL 27, 43: "*baptizatus est sine sensu...non quod in nescientis corpore fiebat.*" Augustine himself retorts: "*How wrong was I*". No wonder that later on he would argue so strongly in favour of the dire necessity of infant baptism.
6. See Conf 3,12,21: CCL 27, 39: "*...et nonnullis quaestiunculis iam multos imperitos exagitassem...*".
7. Conf. 3,12,21: CCL 27,38: "*Quem cum illa femina rogasset, ut dignaretur mecum conloqui et refellere errors meos et dedocere me male ac docere bone...*".

Confessions of Augustine one could also study the theme of conversion from the other side of the medal, that is, from how Augustine himself had very often attempted to convert others, especially his closest friends. The events in the incident when he attempted to save his childhood friend Alypius, is indeed an intricate, but, at the same time, a very intriguing one. Augustine is at the time of the incident in Carthage, trying to make a career in teaching rhetoric. There he happens to meet one of his most beloved and cherished of childhood friendships, the young Alypius. In book six of his *Confessions*, Augustine goes through the more salient incidents that marked this rediscovered one time childhood friendship. He realized that this friend of his was up to his neck in the mud of immorality as a result of his madness for the circuses. The account of how Augustine came to this shocking discovery is the following: *“I had discovered that he loved the circuses with a passion likely to be his undoing, and I was extremely anxious because he seemed to me bent on wasting his excellent promise, if indeed he had not already done so. I had, however, no opportunity to restrain him by any kind of pressure, either out of goodwill as a friend or by right as his teacher, for I presumed that his attitude to me was the same as his father’s, though in fact he was not like that...I did not tackle him about his reckless addiction to worthless shows, or attempt to save him from ruining his fine intelligence on them, because it slipped my memory...You brought about his correction through my agency, but without my knowledge...”*⁸

Now, what Augustine seems to be putting forward here is another incident of an attempt at converting others. The vocabulary which is made use of in this incident is indeed one which recalls religious conversions in antiquity. Augustine later on recalls that the incident could have been orchestrated by God as a challenge meant to elicit out of him an attempt to bring out his friend Alypius from the misery he had fallen into, namely convert him to lead a correct way of life. But at the time that Augustine is being challenged to live up to his ideal and profession, he confesses, was not quite the appropriate one. Augustine recalls that at that time he had indeed extremely mixed feelings as to how he ought to have dealt with his friend upon the

8. Ib. 6,7,11: CCL 27,81: *“Et compereram, quod circum exitiabiliter amaret, et grauiter angebar, quod tantam spem perditurus uel etiam perdidisse mihi uidebatur. Se monendi eum et aliqua coercitione reuocandi nulla erat copia uel amicitiae beniuolentia uel iure magisterii. Putabam enim eum de me cum patre sentire, ille uero non sic erat...Sed enim de memoria mihi lapsus erat agere cum illo, ne uanorum ludorum caeco et praecipiti studio tam bonum interimeret ingenium... ut aperte tibi tribueretur eius correctio, per me quidem illam sed nescientem operatus es”.*

topic of circuses. Augustine confesses that at the time he was not so sure whether in the case of this childhood friend of his, he ought to have acted according to that highly consecrated element of classical Roman ideal of friendship in antiquity, one which had been so excellently been spoken of by Cicero, namely, the *amicitiae benivolentia*.⁹

On the other hand, Augustine could also have entertained some doubts as to whether, then, he ought to have acted and come to the *spiritual* aid of his childhood friend, on the basis of his *iure magisterii*, by right, that is, as his teacher. In the latter case, therefore, Augustine ought to have acted in favour of his friend and tried to drag him out of the mire of the immorality of those illicit shows, due to his profession, that of rhetoric. He must have certainly recalled very well that the duties imposed on him as a teacher by that art of the right use of words consisted in the *tria officia orationis*, which had been defined as the duty to *teach*, *please* and *admonish* (*persuade*), namely, *docere*, *delectare et flectere*.¹⁰ At the time of his writing of the *Confessions*, Augustine had already canonized these three aspects of the duties of the Christian orator, rhetor, and teacher. He had described them as the duty to *teach*, to *please* and to *convert*, his hearers to accept the word of God as the rule of their right way of living Christianity in the fifth century.

It is in the second part of the whole episode, however, that Augustine speaks of the other aspect of *conversion*, namely the *correctio* aspect. At the time in which the whole episode took place, Augustine would certainly have sounded anachronistic to the flow of events of the *Confessions* had he spoken of having *converted* his friend Alypius. This could be the more plausible reason for his defining his attitude towards his childhood friend as one of *correctio*. The term could be further elaborated upon by analyzing Augustine's use of the term in the case of God, as a father, who chastises, who corrects, those yet immature and gullible children of

9. Cf Cicero, *De Amicitia*, 19: "Namque hoc praestat amicitia propinquitati, quod ex propinquitate benevolentia tolli potest, ex amicitia non potest; sublata enim benevolentia amicitiae nomen tollitur, propinquitatis manet." ("For friendship excels relationship in this, that goodwill may be eliminated from relationship while from friendship it cannot; since, if you remove goodwill from friendship the very name of friendship is gone".) See also John T. Fitzgerald (editor), *Graeco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship*, SBL Resources for Biblical Study – 34, Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia USA 1997; Jacques Follon – James McEvoy (editors), *Sagesses de l'amitié*. Anthologie de textes philosophiques anciens, Cerf, Éditions Universitaires de Fribourg, Switzerland 1996.

10. Cicero, *De Oratore* 69: "Erit igitur eloquens...ut probet ut delectet, ut flectat..."

his, our first parents, Adam and Eve in paradise after their Fall. There can be no doubt that the *Genesis* account, which speaks about that very important didactic element, namely, the correction of our first parents, in order that they be educated after having committed their sin, entails also the idea of Christian salvation.¹¹ The same idea of the correction of the sin of the first-created man (Adam and Eve) by the first-born of God (Christ), had certainly not been ignored by Augustine himself in recalling the details of the whole incident: "... but you, Lord, guide the courses of your creatures."¹²

In any case, all in all, the details of this episode too, as in the case of most of the other similar episodes in the *Confessions*, for Augustine they are all shrouded in the nebulous character of his later recalling of the same. But Augustine does acknowledge the fact that God had made use of him, and that through him had brought Alypius to his senses, and converted him: "You brought about his correction through my agency, but without my knowledge..."¹³ A couple of lines further down, Augustine again hints at the idea that at the time he had had no intention of converting, of saving, or curing, Alypius from that pestilence.¹⁴ Again Augustine sadly confesses his weakness and neglect of his duties at this time, for the fact that he had not corrected Alypius, and converted him to the ways of the Lord.

The last incident which could also provide us with some insights in the exercise of reading backwards into the term of *conversion* in the *Confessions*, namely, is the way in which Augustine too could be considered as a catalyst of the ideal of conversion. The incident can be read in book eight. The context is Augustine's struggle with lady *Contenance*. The struggle is described in terms of the classical rhetorical debates, the *controuersiae*: "All this argument in my heart raged only between myself and myself."¹⁵ Appropriate to the *genre* into which Augustine had initially meant to insert his *Confessions*, this kind of rhetorical and oratorical *genre* of *controuersia* was also meant therefore to be one that had gone on raging *within*

11. See also St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Aduersus Haereses* 3,9.

12. *Conf.* 6,7,11: CCL 27, 81: "Verum autem, domine, tu, qui praesides gubernaculis omnium, quae creasti..."

13. *Ib.* 6,7,12: CCL 27, 81: "...ut aperte tibi tribueretur eius correctio, per me quidem illam sed nescientem operatus es."

14. *Ib.* 6,7,12: CCL 27,81: "...quod tunc de Alypio ab illa peste sanando non cogitauerim".

15. *Ib.* 6,11,27: CCL 27,130: "Ista controuersia in corde meo non nisi de me ipso aduersus me ipsum".

himself. He had not meant initially the *Confessions* to be for public consumption. But things went otherwise, and they did end up to be public. Alypius, we read, is himself wholly taken up and completely engaged in the outcome of Augustine's struggle in the garden scene. The context is once more that of Augustine's narrative of his own conversion, but this time too it had engaged others, Alypius once again: "*Alypius stood fast at my side, silently awaiting the outcome of my unprecedented agitation*".¹⁶ Augustine moves a couple of metres away from where he and his friend Alypius were in the garden. Alypius is described as ardently awaiting the outcome of his friend's and mentor's struggle that he saw to be raging on within him. The eventual outcome of this *controversia* would definitely involve him too, he could feel it in himself. The events of the whole scene in the garden in Milan, can be seen to revolve completely around Augustine. He is the principal actor and Alypius is the bystander. The denouement comes as soon as Augustine had read the words of admonition of the Apostle in his *Letter to the Romans*;¹⁷ he recalls that he had discarded the Book, and immediately referred to Alypius what he had been going through. But Alypius too had had his own revelation, after having himself reopened the Book and read the next verse from *Romans*, namely: "*Make room for the person who is weak in faith*".¹⁸ These words confirm the thesis again that Alypius acknowledges that Augustine had once again been the catalyst of his conversion, this time to Christianity: "*Confirmed by this admonition he associated himself with my decision and good purpose without upheaval or delay, for it was entirely in harmony with his own moral character, which for a long time now had been far, far better than mine*".¹⁹

In the study and description of this *conversion* scene too, the language of this *conversion* incident of Alypius by Augustine, is entirely couched in the classical rhetorical jargon of the *controversia* and *suasoria* exercises which Augustine knew extremely well, and in which he himself had been engaged in so often in his lectures

16. *Ib.* "*At Alypius affixus lateri meo inusitati motus mei exitus tacitus opperiebatur*". The term *exitus* also pertains to the *controversiae* exercise, it is referred to the outcome of the judicial linguistic struggle throughout the argumentation of a case. Augustine is arguing the case of his former futile and frivolous pursuits which he is about to discard and relinquish in his newly found path of *Contentia*.

17. 13,13-14.

18. 14,1.

19. *Conf.* 8,12,30: CCL 27,132: "*Sequebatur uero: Infirmum autem in fide recipite*". *Quod ille ad se retulit mihique aperuit. Sed tali admonitione firmatus est placitoque ac proposito bono et congruentissimo suis moribus, quibus a me in melius iam olim ualde longaeque distabat, sine ulla turbulenta cunctatione coniunctus est*".

in rhetoric. The only difference here is that the textbook is no longer that of the past masters of rhetorical exercises, but the Sacred Scriptures. Augustine has won over his friend to his own position, that of one intending to return to Christianity and move away from that pestilence, the infamous teachings of the Manichees. There is now no more room for any kind of retort by the adversary, Alypius, who in fact desists from presenting any upheaval or revenge: “*without any upheaval or delay...*”²⁰ Both *victor* (Augustine), and *loser* (Alypius) are won over by that same kind of divine *admonition*, and not any kind of Delphic oracle. It is also worth noting that, once again, this *conversion* scene too, of Alypius by Augustine, needed to be ratified by the mother, Monnica. “*We went indoors and told my mother, who was overjoyed.*”²¹ The incident is once again described in the language of that ancient liturgical and imperial terminology of the *narratio gesta Dei*, or the *narratio mirabilia Dei*, the narrative of those great, wonderful and powerful saving actions of the God of Israel in favour of His Chosen People in the Old Dispensation: “*When we related to her how it had happened she was filled with triumphant delight and blessed you who have power to do more than we ask...*”²²

There is no doubt quite a few other minor events throughout the *Confessions* which could lend themselves to this kind of re-reading of the theme of *conversion* (-s) in the Book, *backwards*. In the task of exploring even deeper Augustine’s state of mind throughout the composition of this great and universal religious masterpiece, if we really desire to understand his insights, in order that we may imitate him, it is not to Augustine that we are exhorted to turn. Augustine himself provides us with the key towards this kind of understanding and penetration of his thoughts: we are to ask Him whom he declared to be the unique Hearer of this work. Then we are to be enjoined to make ours that unique concluding prayer: “*Let us rather ask of you,*

20. *Ib.* “...*sine ulla turbulenta cunctatione coniunctus est*”. There is in this phrase once more a clear reference to a theme already so dear to Augustine, namely that of the need for the Christian of bowing down his haughtiness to the saving power and holiness of the Word of God in the Sacred Scriptures. The theme he had already elaborated in his commentary on *The Lord’s Sermon on the Mount* towards the year 393CE. The struggle here regards the one against that rhetorical and oratorical pride in which he had been brought up and educated; but here, in this case, it would have been one against the word of God, in the Scriptures. Augustine’s religious attitude can be clearly felt now, the recognition of the need of humility and docility to the Word of God in the Scriptures.

21. *Ib.* “*Inde ad matrem ingredimur, indicamus: gaudet.*”

22. *Ib.* “*Narramus, quemadmodum gestum sit: exultat et triumphat et benedicebat tibi, qui potens es ultra quam petimus et intellegimus facere...*”

*seek in you, knock at your door. Only so will we receive, only so find, and only so will the door be opened to us. Amen”*²³

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23. *Ib.* 13,38,53: *CCL* 27, 273: “*A te petatur, in te quaeratur, ad te pulsetur: sic, sic accipietur, sic inuenietur, sic aperietur. Amen*”. See also *Mt* 7, 7-8, and, *Lk* 11,9-10.