

Teachings of St. Augustine and John Calvin

INTRODUCTION

Due to several aspects of his approach to philosophy and religion, John Calvin can be correctly identified as Augustinian. The teachings of the Catholic Church on free will and predestination are the doctrines postulated by St. Augustine, Doctor of Church. Calvin made Augustine's doctrines the basis of his own teachings on free will and predestination. This paper aims at reviewing philosophic ideas of St. Augustine and John Calvin and proving that Calvin's ideas about free will and predestination belong to the hyper-Augustinian tendency. The evidence for the arguments includes Scripture references and some of the reflections of Augustine and Calvin.

ST. AUGUSTINE AND JOHN CALVIN ABOUT PREDESTINATION AND FREE WILL

The notions of free will and predestination are in the center of St. Augustine's doctrine. Some of the teachings contributed by Augustine to the Church advance the idea of domination of predestination in people's lives: he argued that an individual does not have free will; all probabilities, fortuities and accidents are conducted by God's will. It is easy to notice the influence of Augustine's philosophy on John Calvin's teachings, "God has bestowed upon us. Hence we are ever dependent on him" (Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion 118). Thus, both philosophers claimed that all events that take place in one's life are predetermined; that a man is able to neither build his/her destiny nor interpret why different events take place in his/her life.

This raises the following question: if a human is not able to influence the course of his/her life, how can they deserve the heavenly life after death? According

to Augustine's and Calvin's views, humans' life after death is also predestinated: particularly, the Calvinist position is the following, "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life and others for ordained to everlasting death" (Wesley 153). In Augustine's philosophy, salvation of a soul is a gift that is not given to everyone; God chooses souls of people whom He loves to lead them towards the life in the paradise. Analogically, according to Calvin, some are chosen for salvation by the grace of God, and some are damned to eternal punishment. Both Augustine's and Calvin's theories claim that angels and some humans are chosen by God and stay protected by Him like a bird protects nestlings with its wings.

After Adam's fall, the whole humanity was cursed (Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion 118). God created Adam and Eve in His own image and commanded them not to eat from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (121). From the moment of violation of this command, Adam and Eve were banished from paradise, cursed and thrown into a miserable condition while their progeny lost the opportunity to live in paradise. According to St. Paul, disobedience was the beginning of all evil; however, Augustine says that pride is the first evil in the history of humanity, "Augustine says that all have broken God's covenant in that one in all whom has sinned" (McNeill 123). The consequence of Adam's sin is the transmission of God's indignation to all future generations. This is interpreted as the grounds for saying that that the humankind is predestinated and the fate of each human is predetermined. St. Paul is of the view that "all are subject to corruption not of their own will" (122). Paul says that even though we wish to do good deeds, we may end up being evil and taking immoral actions, quite contrary to our will. However, God has chosen a group of people that are closer to Him; Calvinists argue

that “God gives it to some only not others, because he has “absolutely, unconditionally predestinated” them to life before the foundation of the world” (Wesley 152). In the Bible, we see many people who were chosen for salvation by God’s will. Abraham, Moses, Jacob, prophets and Disciples of Christ are among them. The Bible shows that God will not choose all human beings but only a selected few to receive the bliss of salvation: for example, He loved Jacob and hated Esau. Augustine and Calvin are of the same view: God chooses some people for salvation and condemns some people for eternal punishment; for them both, it is “clear that our salvation comes about solely from God’s mere generosity” (Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion 134). God chose and led a group of people who lived in Israel with the call of Abraham. He appointed Moses as the pastor and leader of Israel not considering the others, “He has not dealt this with any other nations and has not shown them his judgments” (McNeill 142). According to Augustine’s and Calvin’s views, in no way is a human able to predetermine or change God’s choice.

Generally, Calvin thinks that the whole humankind also does not have free will because it is not able to make right decisions, do good deeds and live in harmony and happiness; that is why “whom He did predestinate, them He also called; and whom He called, them He also justified; and whom He justified, them He also glorified” (Calvin on Free Will para. 2). Like Augustine’s teaching, Calvin’s theory emphasizes that God is wise and perspicacious: He has a correct notion of good and bad and foresees what destiny it is better to give to every human. An individual him/herself is weak and limited in his/her ability to understand, evaluate and judge; all souls are completely predisposed to sin because of commitment of the original sin, and some are saved, but not due to their own intention to be good, but because of the unconditional grace of God. According to Augustine, “Whether a man is a

guilty unbeliever or an innocent believer, he begets not innocent but guilty children for he begets them from a corrupted nature” (Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion 126).

The abovementioned arguments illustrate the main similarity between the teachings of Calvin and St. Augustine: grace is a gift of God for the chosen people, which He bestows on them unconditionally, through the Holy Spirit. St. Paul also states that salvation is the grace of God which is not showered according to the individuals’ merits but given to them as a divine gift. However, this should not be interpreted as the green light for committing evil deeds and plunging into sin: aspiration for being good and faith in God are also important, “Every good and perfect gift, therefore, is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights” (Disputation 11 para. 14). According to the teachings of Augustine, “Without grace men do nothing good when they either think or wish or love or act” (Question 109: The Necessity of Grace para. 4). Augustine is of the opinion that human cannot expect to be bestowed with God’s mercy without grace. Despite God initially determines a group of selected people to give them His love, this love can be easily lost in case a human is sinful and ungrateful. Without God in his/her heart, no one can reach Him, as every deed is known to Him. However, Calvin is of another opinion: if grace is given to a human, it is never taken away; for example, even if a selected human is not a believer, he/she stays under God’s grace.

CRITICISM AND COUNTERARGUMENTS

St. Augustine’s and Calvin’s ideas are sometimes met with criticism. Critics’ strongest counterargument is that God created people in His image and likeness and gave them intellect. Since the humankind shares the intellect of God, it shares His

understanding of the good and the evil. Therefore, every individual is the master of his/her own actions; he is the master of his/her wishes and destiny.

One may find a response to this idea in Augustine's works. He says that the humankind "was able to sin and not to sin. Now, too, whatever a man wills is given to him; but his willing good, he has by God's assistance" (Question 109: The Necessity of Grace para. 10). It means that whenever a human intends to do good things and refrain from the evil, it is not his/her choice but also the grace of God. From this fact we can understand that, according to Augustine, an individual does not have freedom and everything is determined and predestinated, and this is what Calvin states as well.

CONCLUSION

Augustine and Calvin are of the same view on free will and predestination. Both scholars argue that everything depends on the grace of God which is showered unconditionally on selected people. "Absolute predestination" and "man does not have free will" are the central ideas of works by St. Augustine, Doctor of Catholic Church. These doctrines are also the basis of teachings and works of Calvin. The basic point in Augustine's absolute predestination doctrine is that some people are saved by God, but on the other hand, He condemns some for eternal damnation. The humankind cannot understand the criteria used in this judgment. This is what exactly Calvin says though expanding the idea: the selected people will be saved forever even if they are not believers. Augustine remarks that the humankind does not have free will not only to decide what good and evil is, but even to do good and righteous thing on its own: whatever an individual does, it happens only due to Gods' grace. A similar idea can be met in Calvin's teaching. It can be concluded from the

conducted analysis that Calvin's philosophy refers to the hyper-Augustinian tendency due to his similar notion of predestination and free will of individuals. Also, there are other similarities in the teachings: for example, the humankind cannot avoid sin without the grace of God, as well as aspire for committing good deeds.

The ideas shared by Augustine and Calvin are criticized by other philosophers. The main counterargument is that the humankind is created in the image and likeness of God and given intellect; therefore, people are given the power to participate in their own destinies. Since God has the power to do good, we also share this ability with Him. This philosophical approach argues that we are the masters of our deeds and thoughts.

Works Cited

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