

**Augustine as Guide for the Good Life:
In Dialogue with Philosopher Jamie Smith¹**

By Wilco de Vries

Few philosophers sell more than half a million books, but Jamie Smith is one of them. Professor of philosophy at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Editor-in-Chief of *Image*, a magazine about art and faith, and author of *On the Road with Saint Augustine*, Smith is a man with many faces and just as many talents. Wilco de Vries interviewed Smith about Augustine and Dooyeweerd, and asks advice for the revitalizing of Christian philosophy in the Netherlands.

You have studied at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, you re-edited Dooyeweerd's *In the Twilight of Western Thought*, and currently teach at Calvin University. Where and when did Augustine wander into this Neo-Calvinistic world?

“At the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS). My teacher, Bob Sweetman, who was a long-time professor at the ICS, actually trained as a medievalist. He introduced me into the Neo-Calvinistic tradition and philosophy and built bridges to the sources of this tradition. He had us read *De Ordine* (About Order), one of Augustine's early dialogues. In a certain sense I thus began to read Augustine and Dooyeweerd side by side. I experienced the Augustinian and Neo-Calvinistic traditions as a unity because they share a deep sense of holism. They rejected dualism, gave a significant place to the human race as an affective being, and gave a much richer description of *ratio* or reason than did Enlightenment philosophers.”

You emphasize the continuity between Augustine and the Neo-Calvinistic tradition. Where do you see the differences?

I find the Neo-Calvinist critique on Augustine as a dualist goes way too fast. Also, I find the historiography of Vollenhoven not particularly clarifying and useful. It is too much of pushing thinkers into their boxes. Of course, there are Platonic elements in the thought of Augustine, but the later bishop has developed further. He begins more and more to see reality in the light of the incarnation. In addition,

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the Dooyeweerdian stream, as I have learned to know it, lends itself to an individualized spirituality. Augustine offers here a welcome correction with his robust ecclesiology and his emphasis on the sacraments.

(Let me lay my cards on the table: I do not define myself as a Reformed philosopher. That said, the two years I spent at the ICS have been the most intellectually formative of my life. I still have the idea that I live out of the spirit of that tradition.)

In your work do you lay the emphasis on desire, as, for example, in *Desiring the Kingdom*? Does that emphasis form a correction on “worldview-thinking” where the stress appears to lie on reason?

“I think that Augustine, Calvin, Kuyper and Dooyeweerd are part of a deep philosophical-theological undercurrent. Throughout history, various accents have been laid and there is a variety of blind spots. When you read Augustine, you become aware of elements that receive less emphasis in Dooyeweerd and the succeeding tradition. I think that the Reformed tradition after Dooyeweerd is still very Neo-Kantian. In its criticism of the Enlightenment, this tradition is most likely too unaware of their own rather narrow concept of rationality. In that sense, reading Augustine means paying attention to love and desire, ‘de ordo amoris.’ Augustine will most likely also help you see things in Dooyeweerd and Bavinck that we initially overlooked.”

Augustine helps you to read Bavinck and Kuyper with another hermeneutic? When you read Augustine you can become aware of elements that receive less emphasis by Dooyeweerd and the tradition after him. Augustine helps you to read Bavinck and Kuyper with another hermeneutic?

“Yes. You know what is so interesting? During the mid-nineteen nineties, during my time at ICS, we read feminist literature and brought that into dialogue with Neo-Calvinist philosophy. The feminists we read were critical of the Kantian ego. Reading them made me realize that some aspects of the Reformed ego are also very Kantian. When we hold philosophical and theological dialogue in a broader context, we can pick out themes from the Christian tradition that otherwise we might forget.”

Imagine a reader of Sophie who does not know you. He goes to your website, reads your blogs and reviews your books. The person may well gain the impression that you enjoy integrating opposites. You are a Canadian who works in the USA. You received your doctorate from a Catholic university (Villanova University); you work at a Neo-Calvinist centre (Calvin University); you are Reformed and Charismatic. You have written books about Postmodernism and an introduction to Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, one of the greatest metastories of the past decade. What is the red thread? Augustine's theology of desire?

Laughing, "I hope Jesus is that red thread, but you're asking a good question. Catholicism in its deepest, most robust sense of the word is one of the impulses of my philosophical work. There are so many different gifts in the Body of Christ in all its various appearances. I try to listen and to search for the gifts where they are to be found. That, of course, is a deep Augustinian impulse: All truth is God's truth. At the same time, this is the approach I learned at the ICS. [Smith walks away from his desk and digs around in his book case.] Do you know this book of Jacob Klapwijk, Sander Griffioen and Gerben Groenewoud, *Bringing into Captivity Every Thought*? This is a book I had to read at the ICS. Its basic message for me was that we are philosophers centred in Christ, and that is the reason we can dialogue with other people and listen to the truth wherever it is found. I have tried to embody this attitude in my work. I do not think it a virtue if on your fiftieth you think the same as on your twentieth."

Very Augustinian: I admit I try to belong to that group of people who write while they are developing themselves and who develop themselves while they are writing" (Augustine, letter 143.2).

"Precisely! I want to stay curious, listen and remain critical about my earlier thoughts should that become necessary. Especially here in the American context, the culture wars are overwhelming. I don't want to sound complacent when I say that I try to transcend these culture wars. I hope that my work is characterized by an openness to ideas and to truth wherever these are found."

Is your stance also formed by your earlier work in hermeneutics and the virtue of hermeneutical generosity?

“Absolutely! At the ICS I discovered not only the entire Reformational tradition but also that of continental philosophy, especially Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer and Derrida. I found the conversations within the phenomenological and hermeneutical tradition very fruitful for thinking through Christian questions. It is probably similar in the Netherlands, but here in the USA, Christian philosophy threatens to become dominated by analytical philosophy. Just think of Al Plantinga’s approach. I find it very encouraging that a small but growing group of continental, phenomenological philosophers has arisen that also thinks Christianly. For me, Merold Westphal was a great example. I have learned much from him.”

Let’s go back to Augustine for a moment. He appears to be more for you than just one who inspires you. At the end of *On the Road with Saint Augustine*, you write about your visit to Augustine. Is he also important for you because as Canadian in the USA you yourself are a kind of pilgrim? Do you feel a kind of existential relationship with Augustine as he tells how he moved from Africa to Rome and Milan?

“Absolutely. I think that Augustine in his entire life lived at some distance from society. He is a philosopher and theologian, but his heart is more in caring for the faithful in Carthage and Hippo. That feeling between cultures and intellectual centres is a very healthy space within which to reflect. It is difficult, but it keeps you honest. The challenge, of course, is that you naturally begin to feel somewhat homeless. I do not really have a philosophical background, but I do have a community, friends and other meaningful connections that feed my philosophical reflections. Philosophers are always more. I hope that my work is characterized by an open attitude towards ideas and truth, wherever they may be found, not only in their mind. To cultivate our philosophical imagination, we must pay attention to all sorts of aspects of our being human.”

In your book you say that modernity is Augustinian. Can you expand on that claim?

“I perhaps enjoyed mostly the writing of this part of *On the Road with Saint Augustine*. I have been trained in the twentieth-century French philosophy of Derrida and Foucault. I also enjoy Albert Camus and other French writers. It is so fascinating that when you look at figures like Camus or Derrida or Jean-Francois

Lyotard, you realize somewhere along the line that they have all preoccupied themselves with Augustine in a very serious manner. They are all Algerians and come from North Africa. They lived like Augustine: they left North Africa for the intellectual centre of the Continent. A part of my book is therefore Heidegger and his reading of Augustine. Many existential concepts are the direct trickle-down effect of philosophers that work on Augustine. In that sense, the modern search for authenticity is a direct product of how Heidegger read Augustine's *Confessions* or, at least, an implication. In a certain way we do not realize how Augustinian we are. Because we have inherited Augustinian questions via existentialism, I want to remind people of Augustine's answers to these questions.

Continuing along this line, in what respect has Augustine's idea of freedom influenced the existential, modern striving for authenticity and in which way does it differ?

“As I see it, Augustine's work is a revolutionary moment in the history of Western thought when it deals with acknowledging the agency of the human self. I am referring to the recognition of our inner being, freedom and desire. Even desire is related to freedom. Who do I want to be? How do I become free? In that sense the blooming of the Kantian Enlightenment ideal of autonomy and freedom was possible only through the seeds that were planted by Augustine. In modernity, freedom becomes negative: I am free to the extent that I am not restrained. Freedom is to be able to do what I want. For Augustine, true freedom is the capacity to do the good, to live up to our purpose. Augustine's freedom sounds like a kind of prison to some modern people, but I think that, now in our twenty-first century, we see the effects of unrestricted freedom: slavery to the passions of any sort of modern tyranny. That is the reason that I think Augustine's concept of restricted freedom—that is, freedom from evil and a focus on the good—is a gift for a society that is exhausted by her pseudo-freedom. “

Freedom assumes relationship and community. In your book you strongly emphasize the importance of community in order to come to faith and true freedom. Here's a citation: “The turning point for Augustine was not an argument, but Ambrose” (150). In your emphasis on community I see many comparisons with Stanley Hauerwas. That is why I want to place the question often put to Hauerwas before you: Where can we find your church?

Laughing: “In Grand Rapids, Stanley had an enormous influence on me. About a decade after the ICS, I woke up and had to process the idealism of that image that was dished up for me. The church I write about in my books is not perfect; it is just an ordinary space where people try to live along God’s story. For that, we need a liturgy and works of mercy and justice. It is not the large sexy mega-church around the corner with 2,000 people. It is rather a small Presbyterian or Methodist church that never makes the news. Just becoming a part of an intentional community makes certain demands on me, because that’s where I learn to love God and my neighbour, even on days that such a community makes me angry. You don’t need a perfect church to be a forming church. I think many churches are giving form in a way they do not realize. Another aspect that I must mention—and that demands a much longer discussion—is the manner in which the church can misshape, misform, because they are caught up in political or racist ideologies. The church is always a mixed body, but that also is a very Augustinian principle: the chaff and the wheat.”

Do I understand you right when I say your kind of church demands faithfulness? A mega-church does not demand commitment, for you can enter just for the show and leave when you want. That small Methodist church demands loyalty. You are challenged, formed and mis-formed, but it is through that commitment that God gives His grace.

“Yes. And here we come back to the theme of the sacraments. God is present in the word and at the table. This regular meeting with God in that “monotonous” reality amounts to a submerging in the river of the Spirit in a manner we will never understand fully.”

You are also part of another community, namely the university. In your book you write about the vice of *curiositas*, that extreme striving after knowledge, which can arouse fear because we must “be with it.” Does the university and the constantly increasing specialization feed this vice?

Here we must reflect at a couple of levels. I think this is the case especially in large universities like Duke. Philosophers are always more than just reason and in order to cultivate our philosophical imagination, we must pay attention to all sorts of aspects of being human and appreciate new knowledge. The hyper-specialization

that goes together with the desire for the new almost undermines education. There is a form of curiosity where it is only about the promotion of knowledge to show that we have broadened out our knowledge. It is not about the good life. Such an approach to research is a breeding nest for competition and discourages friendship. I teach at a smaller university where we need to utilize a much more holistic approach to education and on the strife after wisdom and formation. The danger at my kind of university is not so much obtaining research grants and the proclivity for the newest of the new, but the pure pragmatism of knowledge. I need this knowledge, so that I can earn my income in this position. Such an attitude undermines what Augustine means with a wise and good life. The last thing I want to say is that philosophy as a discipline is in some sense the most guilty. In hardcore academic philosophy no one is interested in wisdom. It is simply about winning the debate, to be original. That's the reason I do not devote much energy to participating in academic philosophy, for I have different goals.

[In which manner do you think a Christian university can serve as an antidote against this misformation through *curiositas*?](#)

Whether we at Calvin University form an antidote is another question. What I mean is that today it is very difficult to be an antidote, because both students and parents have a series of expectations about what the universities must do. We need to give students information from their fifth to their eighteenth about what a university is and does. What should be possible idealistically at a Christian university is a holistic and integrated curriculum, a vision of how all disciplines contribute to an understanding of God, the world and ourselves.

The problem is that the market for higher education opposes such a vision. We have all to compete in the market of higher education, and we all try to sell a product instead of helping people develop a vision. You are catching me, I think, at a very hopeless moment when it comes to the possibilities for Christian higher education here in the USA. It is not that it is impossible *per se*, but because there are all those environmental factors that restrain us. Universities hunt for the lowest common denominator of pragmatism."

[One final question. The Foundation for Christian Philosophy in the Netherlands is currently trying to rediscover and redesign itself with an eye to the new generation.](#)

You are a very talented writer and you have won several prizes for your books. Do you have any advice about how the Foundation can write in such a way that the new generation will read it, especially in a time of social media and infinite scrolling?

That's a very good question. I think that we must resist the sound bites of the social media, because they can never deliver wisdom to us. There is a difference between intellectual and academic writing. Academic writing is technical, written for a specific guild, an internos kind of circle of people. However, that is not the only way to write intellectually. Think, for example, about Alain de Botton or even a Christopher Hitchens. My hope is that the next generation will embrace writing as an occupation. During the last decade, I have worked at making it understood that writing is its own profession and not merely a means to share ideas. It is the embrace of the aesthetic in philosophical writings for a broader public.

Put in Dooyweerdian terms, in philosophical writing for the broader public, philosophy is still the leading aspect. However, one also needs to cultivate the aesthetic aspect of writing, so that your writing is beautiful, creates movement, touches the heart. That's the reason I seriously encourage philosophers to read novels and poetry. This is not in order to mine citations for an argument you have already decided, but in order to live into the language, to realize that language can also work in other ways. Most philosophical writings are linear: argument A, B, and C lead to conclusion D. In poetic prose and in fiction, language wiggles. It is almost a game. One of my dreams is a workshop for philosophers to write creatively. I am still learning how to write creatively, but what I have learned has come from my contact with writers of novels and poetry. One of my side roles is that of editor of the magazine *Image*, a literary quarterly. One of the reasons I do this is to hang around novelists and poets.

In order to hone your writing skills?

“Yes, absolutely, but also to learn how to listen.”