



# **Saint Augustine and the Fall of the Soul: Beyond O'Connell and His Critics**

*Ronnie J. Rombs*

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Augustine's understanding of the origin of the soul and the nature of its fall looms as one of the most important and controversial questions among Augustinian scholars since Robert J. O'Connell first began publishing on the topic. O'Connell argued that Augustine embraced Plotinus's doctrine that the soul existed before the body and only fell into bodily life as the result of sin. Such a position, however, is fundamentally incompatible with Christian anthropology: bodily life is intrinsically corrupted; physical existence is regrettable. The supposition that the most influential Christian theologian after St. Paul maintained such a position generated sharp division between scholars who were convinced by O'Connell and those who were not. A scholarly consensus on the subject has not yet developed.

*Saint Augustine and the Fall of the Soul: Beyond O'Connell and His Critics* provides first a critical examination of O'Connell's theses in a readable summary of his work that spanned over thirty years. Secondly, a diachronic study of Augustine's writings traces the development of his understanding of the soul's fall, mapping the limits of Plotinus's influence.

The study recognizes the extent to which Augustine embraced Plotinus's ontology and anthropology and the point at which he abandoned Plotinus. The young Augustine was significantly influenced by Plotinus, and there is substantial evidence that he held a Plotinian doctrine of the soul's fall. But as the anthropological implications that follow from the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* became apparent to him, Augustine departed from Plotinus. Augustine ultimately took the soul's fall to be a moral lapse, retaining Plotinus's imagery vocabulary as a way of expressing a psychology of sin, not an ontological fall.

Augustinian scholars and students in theology and patristics will find the text an invaluable resource on the topic.

Ronnie J. Rombs is assistant professor of theology at St. Joseph Seminary College in Louisiana. He is the coeditor of *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy*.

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK:

"This book deals with an important issue, one that Robert J. O'Connell made his life's work in his study of Augustine. He believed that the theme of the fallen soul is at the center of Augustine's thought, and Ronnie J. Rombs correctly adds that this is because of the importance of salvation to Augustine. The study is well written--complex, flexible, and subtle. There is no similar book in the field."--Eugene TeSelle, Professor Emeritus, Vanderbilt University

"Rombs makes a major contribution to Augustinian studies by his endeavor to clarify O'Connell's position and to qualify it, especially by distinguishing the cosmogenic, ontological, and psychological/moral senses of the fall of the soul."--Roland J. Teske, S.J., Marquette University

"[A]ny student of Augustine will find this work illuminating for its analysis of O'Connell's legacy and for Rombs' own sifting through much of the fourth- and fifth-century questions on the human soul and then showing how Augustine came to understand the nature of the soul, its origin, and its sanctification in Christ."  
-- David Meconi, S.J., *Theological Studies*

"Rombs' little book is divided into two parts. The first provides an invaluable service to students in its lucid and sympathetic account of the development of O'Connell's important and rolling arguments that, while often tortured, seemed to sweep everything in front of them. For this alone the book is worth having. But then, in the second half, Rombs goes much further and joins the many critics of O'Connell who have argued for a less uncompromisingly Plotinian understanding of Augustine's work. Here he moves the scholarly argument forward at least one notch." -- Colin Starnes, *Philosophy in Review*

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