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Listening to hymns and tears of mourning in Augustine's *Confessions*, Book 9

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Abstract

Prior to his conversion in the summer of 386, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) could not decide if the practice of singing in church was appropriate, despite

the long-standing tradition of religious singing in Judaism, and the hymns of early Christianity. He could not yet disassociate singing and music from its history, derived as it was from polytheism, and its use in Greek symposiums and the Roman theatre; in both cases music was used to venerate the gods and arouse passions. In the church of Milan, while listening to hymns and psalms, he succumbs to a persistent melancholia, as though the beauty of the melody and the human voice in church causes him to weep. Augustine may not consider the pleasure of listening to music and song in church to be a sin, but he does admit, at several inter-related moments in the *Confessions*, Book 9, to a deep disquiet about it. The emotions aroused by listening to singing in church unsettle him, and he cannot understand the source of these intense feelings; but when his writings in the *Confessions* are interpreted, being overwhelmed and crying can be attributed to an unacknowledged, but consistent, reason: Augustine mourns, intensely. In mourning, he recalls both the death of others and feels a relentless sense of loss in himself that he neither understands nor overcomes until a series of events outlined in his autobiography. Understanding the meaning of these important inter-related events will allow him ultimately to reconcile his conflicted feelings and, as a presbyter and bishop of Hippo, adopt the singing of hymns in his own church.

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