



Professor Paula Fredriksen

“AUGUSTINE AND I met my junior year of college,” says Paula Fredriksen, “and we’ve been an item ever since.”

That would be St. Augustine of Hippo — a father of the church, a prolific philosopher and writer on spirituality and society, and a central figure in the definition and development of Western Christian doctrine. Fredriksen, Boston University’s William Goodwin Aurelio Professor of the Appreciation of Scripture, has had an enduring fascination with the life and writings of the fourth-century bishop ever since she discovered him in a medieval history class at Wellesley College in 1971. Her past works include two translations of his early commentaries on St. Paul, as well as several explorations of early Christianity and Judaism, among them the National Jewish Book Award–winning *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (2000). She is also a vocal critic of the controversial 2004 Mel Gibson film *The Passion of the Christ* and edited an anthology of essays analyzing and deconstructing the film.

In her latest book, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*, Fredriksen returns to her first love by exploring the historical, social, and cultural developments that gave rise to Christian anti-Judaism and Augustine’s challenges to the growing Christian imperial culture. The

# One Nation, Under Goods

In *Augustine and the Jews*, Professor Paula Fredriksen argues that the pluralism of ancient times trumps the tolerance of today

BY JESSICA ULLIAN



CORBIS

ST. AUGUSTINE

# *In a tolerant society we can be very intolerant, because*

surprise, she says, isn't just that Augustine espoused the Jews' rights to their own religion — it's that different faiths frequently borrowed from one another throughout the early Roman Empire. "In antiquity, all monotheists are polytheists," she says. "It's just that they each have heaven structured a certain way."

Fredriksen spoke with *Bostonia* about what Augustine's writing reveals about cultural clashes and belief systems, then and now.

**BOSTONIA: One of your ideas about both early Christian culture and Augustine himself is that Jews were not as persecuted or reviled as is generally believed. Can you explain the disconnect?**

FREDRIKSEN: The Roman emperor Constantine converts to Christianity in 312, the Theodosian emperors really get to ruling in the 380s and 390s, and in that period, their form of Christianity, called catholicism with a small "c," becomes the sole legitimate religion. But at that point, the most dangerous thing to be, in terms of your health or your actuarial tables, is a Christian of a minority group. The second worst thing to be is a pagan. The safest thing to be, if you're not actually a member of the majority Church, is a Jew.

Most people, and most historians, thought that Jews were persecuted, because Jews are persecuted in the Middle Ages, and there is this vituperative, horrible, negative, insulting language that gentile Christians use for Jews. But that's the other big discovery — rhetoric is just a way of speaking in antiquity, and it sounds horrible.

**Are you saying that much of the conventional wisdom about Augustine's attitude toward the Jews comes from rhetoric, rather than from actions against the Jews?**

Well, the reading my book is given is, 'Did Augustine really like Jews?' He would not have bumped into them in a routine kind of way — he mentions "the Jews" more than he would bump into actual Jews. What's so radically innovative about Augustine is how much of his rhetoric about Jews is resoundingly positive, literally on the grounds that if it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for Augustine. In a way, to make sense of God as the creator is to have a positive orientation toward Judaism. Augustine thought of Paul as keeping kosher and being a Torah-observant Jew his entire life; he was also making the argument that Jesus was an A-plus Orthodox Jew.

We have two pieces of evidence that he really did believe that real Jews were as protected by God as he argued they were in his rhetoric. In one, he actively takes the side of a Jewish plaintiff against a Christian bishop, complaining that the bishop defrauded him of land. We have Augustine's memo to the bishop, saying unhand the land, you've broken Roman property law — absolutely uncomplicated, if he hadn't happened to mention that the plaintiff was Jewish in the first line of the memo.

The second piece of evidence is that in the year 418, on the island of Menorca, a bishop leads one of the first pogroms in the West, and sends a letter about it to every

bishop in the West, urging others to do the same thing. Augustine never praises the bishop, and even though other bishops read the account aloud in church, we have no record of Augustine reading the account. Given the option of starting anti-Jewish social activities, he refused.

**And the anti-Jewish rhetoric of the time is just that — a type of speech?**

Rhetoric is its own planet, and the fact that these people are usually fighting with somebody is a lot of the reason they come to their positions — this whole nation is now in recovery from two years of presidential campaign rhetoric, right? Rhetoric trains you how to present your own position as strongly as possible and to present the opinion of the person you're arguing against as demeaning and make it look as stupid as possible. The description of "the other" is never descriptive — it's a caricature. So this is how Jews are; they're this imagined antitype to Christians in this period. But they are certainly in no physical danger.

**On the contrary — you write that respecting other people's gods is a key part of life in the ancient Mediterranean world.**

In ancient monotheism, different ethnic groups exist, and different ethnic groups have their own gods, and obviously, their gods exist too. When ancient monotheists are talking about heavenly architecture, what they meant is that there was a pyramid structure to divinity, and their god was on top. So there are always other divinities to deal with, and as you would imagine, showing courtesy to other people's gods ensures courteous interactions between the gods' humans. So despite the antipagan rhetoric of Hellenistic Judaism, they'll be very careful when they talk about pagan gods. Nobody wants an angry god on their back — the number-one definition of a god is that a god is bigger and more powerful than you and will mess you up if you get in his or her way.

**It sounds remarkably tolerant.**

It's not a question of tolerance; it's an issue of pluralism. Other people have their own gods, and everybody has to get along, so it's just a condition of existence in antiquity. Now, we're on the far side of Christian culture, and the cosmic clutter of heaven has gotten seriously thinned out. Modern monotheists believe there's only one single God, and people tend to get embarrassed if you talk about angels — that already is too folkloric for many.

So our model today is not pluralism, but tolerance, which is different; tolerance implies that even though I think it's wrong, as long as nobody gets hurt I will tolerate it. But in a tolerant society we can be very intolerant, because we don't think other people's gods really exist. Whereas, I think, what kept ancient people as well-intended, and well-behaved, as they could be, was that they thought everyone's gods existed, so they wanted to be a little more careful.

What's surprising about the invention of religious persecution, which occurs initially in the late pagan Roman period, in the third century, is that the Roman imperial government wanted to move Christians to the both-and

# *we don't think other people's gods really exist.*

---

model — the idea was, sure, do whatever Christian stuff you want to, but also pay respect to the gods of the empire, because the gods of the empire are getting angry, and they're not taking care of the frontiers anymore.

## **What finally tipped the balance toward coercion and persecution?**

Well, it's against the heroic narratives the Church preserves, but there are very few martyrs; in that time, most Christians go along. But when the Christian period of principled religious persecution starts, it is much longer than the pagan period — arguably, once it starts it doesn't stop until the end of the Thirty Years' War, in 1648. Foreign gods are demoted, demonized, and that demon is a rebel against your god, so by persecuting someone who worships what you consider to be a demon, that human becomes a proxy for the demon. The theology enables an act of aggression against minority groups that will, again, be the hallmark of the Western Middle Ages.

When Christian anti-Semitism begins, it's with people saying terrible things about Jews — and the first people who do that, which is very modern, are other Jews. It's differences within the community that drive people crazy. And again, there's this negative rhetoric, and the rhetoric remains after the social conditions have changed. So when the social conditions are quite different — after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West and the beginning of the Barbarian Kingdoms — the rhetoric remains, and at that point, it begins to change from simply a genre of speech to something that affects policy.

## **Why, then, does so much of the discussion surrounding your book focus on the idea that Augustine liked the Jews more than we've believed?**

Among people who bother to think about the history of anti-Semitism, Augustine's reputation is based on the idea that Jews should be “allowed to survive, but not to thrive.” It's always attributed to him, and it sounds like a sound bite. So — the word “allowed” implies superior power, “survival” is a reduced form of existence, and “not to thrive” means actively being kept in a situation of deprivation.

It's always attributed to Augustine, and he never said it. But the sound bite has the power.

## **Do you think this particular interpretation of your book is related to your own conversion to Judaism?**

I've noticed that because I work in historical Jesus, and the historical Jesus of Nazareth happens to have been Jewish, some of my colleagues have a certain anxiety about me, as if I'm some kind of covert operative for making Jesus Jewish, claiming him for the Jewish side.

But there's no direct correlation between ancient Judaism and different forms of modern Judaism. There's a vague family resemblance, but it's not direct. Jesus would be completely baffled if he showed up at a synagogue today. He would be really confused by the fact that contemporary Jews don't sacrifice animals to honor the God of Israel. Even Paul, who would not have been killing animals because Diaspora

populations didn't do that, would be baffled that Jerusalem is now under Jewish hegemony, but that the Temple isn't up and running.

## **So there's not a lot of common ground between the Judaism of Jesus, or the Christianity of Augustine, and what people of those religions practice today.**

No. People tend to be interested in this period, I think, because of the mistaken notion that they'll see themselves in this period. You do see yourself, but only some elements; the other part you see is that what you think of as intrinsic to Christianity, for example, is actually something that comes out of this pagan and Jewish environment. It occurs because of historical context, not because of an intrinsic quality.

Modern Christians and modern Jews have their identity invested in first-century Christians and first-century Jews, but no first-century person can be like a twenty-first century person, and if you're not able to respect that difference, you'll end up doing bad history. You're not able to see these people at all if you take your twenty-first century sense of self and retroject it back. What I was trying to do is enable people to see how this ancient rhetoric, which was generated for its own reasons, ends up shaping so much of our culture. We are the immediate heirs to the arguments of Roman antiquity.

## **Do you think there would be less contemporary anti-Semitism if people considered these issues of speech and context?**

There's always a gap between rhetoric and reality — that's what's valuable about archaeological records, which can help us get some kind of index for it — but that happens in the modern period, too, and it's just as difficult to gauge what causes it and how significant it is. People in the 1930s, when there was this incredible growth of rabid anti-Semitic rhetoric, probably thought it was just one of those moments that would pass. The shock people had from 1945 on is that the social experience was even worse than the rhetoric.

Again, in antiquity it's different. I think the thickness of the divine population had humans better behaved — speaking as a Massachusetts liberal, no one was being mean to each other. The fact that every group had its own gods backing it up meant that people thought a few times before actually persecuting other people.

## **This book is essentially the culmination of work you began as a doctoral student at Princeton. Are you tired of Augustine?**

I just sent a copy of my book off to my old dissertation advisor, and in my note to him, I said, “I promise it's the absolute last chapter!” Augustine was good company — he's smart, he's fun, he's incredibly ingenious, and he's a professional talker and thinker. But the question of his beliefs about the Jews came belatedly to me because of the way that Augustine was focused on understanding Paul. Once I thought that thought, I had to reorient myself. And by having a different angle on things you've been looking at forever, it lines up in a particular way. And that is really exciting. Those are the moments you go into this sort of work for. You feel like God touches you on the brain. ■