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Passionate Order: Order and Sexuality in Augustine's Theology

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In the theological debates today concerning sexuality, one of the most common arguments derives from the created order of things. For some, homosexuality and therefore homosexual people are thought to be disordered and therefore same-sex unions are contrary to the way God ordered the world.¹ In such order-of-creation arguments it is presumed that sex and order must have something to do with one another, that in fact one is the criterion on which the other is based. This is not a new presupposition. Since its birth, Christianity has made this connection between the order of things and sex, a connection that has varied depending on time and place and yet has been preserved in some form throughout the centuries.

St. Augustine made this connection explicitly. In this essay, I explore the relationship between sex and order in Augustine's thought. This relationship, I suggest, is an interwoven one in which Augustine's understandings of order and sex

¹See, for example, Wolfhart Pannenberg, "You Shall Not Lie with a Male: Standards for Churchly Decision-Making on Homosexuality," *Lutheran Forum* 30/1 (February 1996) 28–29, and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000).

The strong interrelation between order and sexuality in Augustine's thought has had long-term effect on Christian thinking about sex. Though Augustine moved beyond a strict body-soul dualism that rejected sex altogether, he left a legacy that has caused considerable sorrow for those outside the perceived proper "order" of human sexuality.

mutually influence one another throughout his work. Perhaps from a study of the interconnection of sexuality and order in Augustine's theology we can learn more about how this connection is made today.

INFLUENCES

Augustine was born in 354 in North Africa. As he wrote in his *Confessions*, Augustine believed that throughout his early life he had struggled as "the slave of an unbreakable habit."² Warned by his mother against fornication and committing adultery with another man's wife, Augustine was sent into the world as a confused teenaged boy caught in the "bubbings" of puberty.³ After remaining faithful to his concubine of nearly fifteen years and fathering his only child, he and his mother sent her away so that he could marry an heiress worthy of his social location. Unable to wait until she was of age, however, he took another consort to ease the pangs of his lustful habit.⁴ To the Augustine writing his *Confessions* ten years later, this was a most shameful moment.

At the same time as he was experiencing this discontent of sexuality, Augustine embarked on a quest for a life of order. This quest began through the ordered philosophy of Plotinus and the theologies of the Manicheans. Finally, though, he discovered the God of his mother. It was only here in the God of Christian Scripture, he realized, that he could find the happiness and order he sought.⁵ As his quest for order confronted a sexuality frothing with lust, the absurdity he perceived in his life began to take a toll. Augustine believed that he had to make a choice. After much wrestling with God, he melted in a baptism of tears, giving himself over to "Mother Continence" and renouncing his lust. It was this event that Augustine saw as his defining moment.⁶ Only later in the *Confessions* does the reader learn that this conversion was perhaps not as complete as Augustine had claimed, for ten years later continence still remained a struggle for Augustine.

ORDER

Augustine's understanding of order was strongly influenced by the philosophy of Plotinus. This philosophy envisioned an ordered universe, a meticulously structured harmony of parts. These parts worked together to form a whole in which the whole was better than the sum of the parts.⁷ This order was also hierarchical, and its epitome was a transcendent Creator who was the source of all life and being. God was immutable and beyond reach for most humans, who had fallen from their place of spiritual beauty and were trapped in the degrading world

²Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Mentor Books, 1963) VI.15.

³Ibid., II.2.

⁴Ibid., VI.15.

⁵Ibid., X.22.

⁶Ibid., VIII.12.

⁷Ibid., VII.13.

of flesh and sex. Now, in its fleshly form, the soul was fragmented, searching for its source of life yet tied to a decadent body. The goal of the human was to return to its spiritual form unencumbered by the flesh. This return was accomplished through the quest to ascend the hierarchy out of material existence into a state of perfectly ordered spiritual contentment in the being of God.

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Although this philosophically ordered universe remained a foundation of Augustine's thought, he encountered a tension that was unacceptable when he brought together the God of the philosophers with the God of the Bible.⁸ For if the God of the Bible had created the material earth and declared it to be “very good,” then it, and thus the body, must be good. Therefore, rather than trying to escape the body to achieve perfection, Augustine believed that the body must be integrated as a part of the whole human so that it could fulfill its proper role as guided by the will and soul.⁹ Instead, Augustine realized, the heart of the problem was the soul. The true conflict was not between an evil body and the good spirit, but rather within the soul itself, where two wills, one carnal, the other spiritual, fought for control so that the soul had divided itself between what was above and what was below.¹⁰ While the material creation must not be viewed with displeasure,¹¹ neither must it be worshiped in place of God. To turn from God toward the lower things of life and pursue the fleshly world as the source of happiness was perversity. It was concupiscence, that “frantic pursuit of frustratingly elusive pleasure” in the things of the world rather than in God.¹²

Strongly influencing this understanding of order, then, was Augustine's vision of disorder, which was centered on personal concupiscence. As we shall see in a moment, concupiscence was not merely the disordered striving for what was below; it became for the later Augustine the symptom and symbol of the soul's original abandonment of God. As Augustine filled out his theology regarding sin, he defined original sin as Adam and Eve's turning from God in their very souls.¹³ Sin was not a body issue, where the soul remained loyal to God while the body turned away. For Augustine, the entire soul had chosen to turn away from its source of life to find happiness in other things. God's punishment for this choice was to have the

⁸Peter R. L. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 168–169.

⁹Augustine, *Sermon 30* 3.4, as quoted in R. A. Markus, “Saint Augustine: Virginité and Marriage,” *Canadian Catholic Review* 5 (1987) 15.

¹⁰Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII.5, 9.

¹¹*Ibid.*, VII.14.

¹²Margaret R. Miles, *Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine's Confessions* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 8.

¹³Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 1984) XXII.22.

body disobey the soul as the soul disobeyed God. The sexual experience became the perfect example of this, for nowhere did humanity more clearly display its state of estrangement than in the inability to control the sexual organs and drive. Once the first humans broke the order, sexual concupiscence became one way that brokenness was experienced. Only in a return to order—for the individual and, through the individual, all of humanity—could contentment in God be established.

Augustine never strayed from this hierarchical picture of order.¹⁴ In his theology, all parts of creation were good and even the physical body had its place in the created order. As long as it remained in that place, it was very good. To stray from that place and trespass outside the order, however, was to be drawn further into chaos and sin. Ultimately, then, Augustine's vision of order was a harmony of contented hierarchy where each part was satisfied in its proper place and each individual existed in proper relationship to God. However, Augustine was quite clear that such order could not be achieved through the power of humankind. While an early Augustine might remark that order, "if we follow it in our lives, will lead us to God,"¹⁵ a later Augustine would state that the human "needs divine direction, which he may obey with resolution, and divine assistance that he may obey it freely."¹⁶ It was the immutable God that was the source of all order and it was only by God's grace that humans would experience order at its truest.¹⁷

SEXUALITY

Augustine's conception of sexuality can be traced through the trajectory of the polemical debates throughout his life.¹⁸ In these controversies we find Augustine struggling with the place of body and sexuality in God's creation, trying to find a middle ground that maintains both the goodness of creation as well as the reality of human sin. Despite the negative reaction of the modern ear to his treatment of sexuality, we must recognize that in his time, Augustine was attempting to be a mediator who was looking for the center between two extreme poles. Finally, it is up to the reader to judge if he found this middle position, but I suggest that while he may have moved the center toward a theological middle ground within the thinking of his day, this middle remained very much a part of the hierarchical order he wished to maintain.¹⁹

¹⁴Ibid., XIX.13.

¹⁵Augustine, *De Ordine*, CSEL 63, II, 4.12, as quoted in R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 78.

¹⁶Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.14.

¹⁷Ibid., XXII.30.

¹⁸For this discussion, I am indebted to the work of Elizabeth A. Clark, especially *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996); "Adam's Only Companion": Augustine and the Early Christian Debate on Marriage," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 21 (1986) 139–162; and "Vitiating Seeds and Holy Vessels: Augustine's Manichean Past," in *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1986) 291–349.

¹⁹See Margaret R. Miles, "Response," in Peter R. L. Brown, *Augustine and Sexuality*, ed. Mary Ann Donovan (Berkeley, CA: Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1983) 18–21, for further discussion of Augustine's relative success in developing a "new" understanding of sexuality.

Much of Augustine's thought regarding sexuality was also influenced by the philosophy of Plotinus. In this view, sexuality existed outside the order of things, since flesh and body were thought to be the degrading result of a fall from the spiritual state. Sexuality in all its forms, including physical reproduction, had been tacked on after the fall, the proof that humans had once been something higher and better than they were in their current form. "For the holder of the ascetic paradigm, what mattered about sexuality was that it was there at all—that in itself was bad enough."²⁰ The philosopher was expected to escape from sex through the rational inward searching of the soul and complete self-control of the body and its members.

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Through the course of his career, Augustine restructured this understanding of sexuality, though it remained embedded within order. What changed, however, was what this order looked like. Once he had declared the body and sexuality as good parts of the order created by God, Augustine had to find the proper location for them in the order. This process would take him through a lifetime of controversy and debate.

Against the Manicheans

Augustine probably began his consideration of sexuality during the nine years he spent with the Manicheans. The Manicheans were a Christian sect that believed in a dual order of creation, asserting that the Divine Light of goodness had been entrapped in the repulsive material world by an evil Darkness. The material flesh was a vessel of the Darkness that imprisoned the Divine and kept it from returning to its ethereal home. Thus, marriage and reproduction were seen as intrinsically evil, a plot used by the Darkness to keep the Divine Light trapped in the flesh.

When Augustine left the Manicheans for the Christianity of his mother, he began to defend his new faith against the Manicheans' view of a weak God and low esteem for body. For Augustine, God was the Supreme Creator, the "incontaminable and incorruptible" center of the universe; to think that such a God could be imprisoned in anything was ridiculous nonsense.²¹ And since God had created the world and declared it good, the material world as created was good as well. Thus, no longer should it be thought that there was a dual human nature, one evil, the other good; rather, body and the continued procreation of body was a good part of human nature and of the created order that God intended. Augustine's

²⁰Brown, *Augustine and Sexuality*, 6–7.

²¹Augustine, *On Continence*, V.14, as quoted in Clark, *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*, 36.

journey toward the integration of sexuality into the good order of things began, then, with his attempts to redeem the material world from those who had declared it as evil.

Against the Ascetics

During Augustine's time, asceticism became a popular way of life among Christians facing the meaninglessness they perceived in the chaos of late Roman society. As a follower of this ascetic lifestyle, the early Christian theologian Jerome upheld virginity over and against all forms of sexuality, including sex within marriage. For him, virginity represented the more holy way of life closer to God's intention. However, another Christian theologian, Jovinian, claimed an equal status for marriage and virginity in the order of things and accused Jerome of being Manichean in his renunciation of body, sexuality, and reproduction. Augustine entered this debate between Jovinian and Jerome after the fact, concerned that Jerome's asceticism had carried him too far. Augustine wanted to avoid the clear rejection of marriage that Jerome seemed to be making and yet maintain virginity and continence as a holy part of the good order. He found a middle ground by defining marriage as good but virginity as better: "Therefore, marriage and fornication are not two evils, the second of which is worse; but marriage and continence are two goods, the second of which is better."²²

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In this debate, Augustine developed more cogently his understanding of sexuality and its place in the order. While virginity and, as a close second, continence were clearly the better choice, God had designed the human race so that all humans would be created from one. Augustine had considered various possibilities for procreation apart from such physical joining but finally named physical procreation in marriage as good, for it played a necessary role in the creation of future generations. Even before the fall, Augustine argued, this intercourse would have taken place in order to fill the earth with the required numbers of saints.²³

However, the debate with Jerome pushed Augustine into a defense of marriage beyond merely a focus on procreation. Augustine now named three goods of marriage: (1) procreation, (2) fidelity, and (3) the sacred bond of the "natural companionship between the sexes."²⁴ Despite these goods of marriage, however, *sexuality* had its proper place only in the first of the goods, namely procreation. In

²²Augustine, *The Good of Marriage*, VIII, in *Treatises on Marriage and other Subjects*, trans. Charles T. Wilcox et al., ed. Roy J. Deferrari (New York: The Fathers of the Church, 1955) vol. 27.

²³Ibid., IX.

²⁴Ibid., III.

the end Augustine considered sexual intercourse as little more than a physical act that produced children. The proper body parts must be put together in the proper way for their proper procreative use in the created order of things. Any other use was to stray from the order into sexual concupiscence when the intercourse "no longer obeys reason but passion."²⁵ In the end, Augustine seemed unable to conceive of any positive unitary function in sexuality itself, even within the marriage between a man and a woman.²⁶

Here, then, was Augustine's "middle ground." Against the common thought of his day he was willing to call marriage good. However, sexuality was simply a necessary evil in order to create saints for God's future city. Outside of marriage sexuality had no place and by its very presence in marriage, sexuality reduced the companionate relationship to a lower status than virginity.²⁷

Against the Pelagians

During the last twenty years of his life, Augustine worked at defending this order from attack by the Pelagians, who saw human nature as essentially good even after the fall and upheld the freedom of humans to work toward the perfect and righteous life. Augustine disagreed with the Pelagians concerning the current state of humanity. Humans were in complete bondage to their sinful state and were completely dependent upon God's grace for their salvation.²⁸ In the midst of this controversy emerged the question of sexuality and its relation to sin. According to the Pelagians, God had created humans good and therefore the natural use of body in sexual intercourse was good as long as it was between a man and a woman in marriage. Augustine too saw sexual intercourse as created good and a natural part of God's created order. However, this vision of sexuality did not exist in humanity's current sinful state. Humans had rejected God and chosen to turn away from God to the things below. While this original sin was a sin of the soul and not a sin of the body, God as punishment had allowed the body to rebel against the soul as the soul had rebelled against God.²⁹ No

²⁵Ibid., X.11.

²⁶It is interesting to note that Augustine uses more erotic language in his description of friendship as "soul-mate" than in his description of marriage. See *Confessions*, IV.4. "...a friendship...sweeter to me than all sweetnesses that in this life I had ever known."

²⁷One can discover in Augustine's theology a hierarchical order in the sexual acts themselves. On the top of the ladder was virginity, which was to be a humble virginity that did not glorify itself. A close second was continence, the renunciation of sex after it had been experienced. Between virginity and continence was widowed continence, usually referring to a woman whose husband had died. On the rung below continence was marriage in which both partners mutually agreed to abstain from sex. Thus, abstinence from all sexual activity continued to be uplifted as superior to any form of sexual intercourse. On the rung below continence was the only chaste form of sexual intercourse: in marriage for the purpose of procreation. Anything else was considered sinful and perverted. Yet due to the fallen nature of humanity, certain activities could be pardoned. As long as sex occurred within a bond of marriage, even if it was for reasons other than procreation, it was allowed. It remained sinful, a venial sin, but it could be overlooked. Even those uses of sexuality that were mortal sins were given a hierarchy in Augustine's order. Highest on the list was adultery, followed by an unnatural act with a prostitute, then an unnatural act with one's wife, and finally an unnatural act with a man. These last three he names as "contrary to nature," for they "use the member of his wife which has not been given for this purpose." *The Good of Marriage*, X.11, XI.12.

²⁸Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.30.

²⁹Ibid., XIV.15.

longer could man control his body, particularly with respect to his sexual drive and members; it had taken on a life of its own and turned from the rational soul's control.³⁰ For Augustine, sexual concupiscence became the perfect illustration of original sin, and the misuse of sexual intercourse was nothing more than a symptom of the ultimate turn from God.

Augustine in fact did allow for the possibility of physical sexual intercourse in paradise and by the end of his career even counted it as a probability.³¹ But it was nothing like the sexual experience humans have now. In paradise, the sexual drive and the sexual organs were under complete control of the rational mind.³² In humanity's current sinful state, however, the sexual organs were out of control.³³ Sexuality in this life was irrational and chaotic, and sexual intercourse was for procreation alone. Anything else proved the fallen nature of the human being. By the end of Augustine's career not only did sexual intercourse provide evidence of the fall, it also became the vehicle transmitting the consequences of original sin from one generation to the next.³⁴ The guilt of sin, represented by sexual concupiscence, was transmitted via the sinful lust that conditions the circumstances of each person's birth. Sex after the fall became the carrier of its own disordered desires of the flesh so that even procreative sexuality became suspect.

In the end, the ultimate picture of perfect sex for Augustine was no sex at all, for in his description of heaven after the bodily resurrection, he described the woman as being "free of the necessity of intercourse and childbirth." The woman's sexual features would remain but they would be a part of a "new beauty, which will not excite the lust of the beholder."³⁵ In this vision he described a nonsexual heaven where there would no longer be need for sexual intercourse because there would be no need for new children. The final order, then, would contain no sexuality at all for there would be no proper use of sexuality.

ORDER AND SEXUALITY

I have suggested that sexuality and order are intertwined in Augustine's theology, interconnected in such a way that it is hard to know where one begins and

³⁰Ibid., XIV.16. I use "man" purposely, for the image invoked seems to be primarily a description of male sexuality.

³¹Ibid., XIV.26.

³²Ibid., XIV.16, 26. In *City of God*, Augustine described this sexual experience: a rational male relaxing on his wife's breast in complete control of his organs, consciously willing his organs into the proper swollen state when it was time to reproduce (a time presumably determined by God's will), penetrating his wife without harming her virginity, and dispatching his seed in a controlled orgasm while maintaining total mental alertness. His wife would remain passive throughout the experience, her body opening under "a natural impulse" (rather than by rational will) to receive the seed without "groans of travail." Thus, impregnation would have been accomplished through a rational act of the male will rather than at the promptings of lust; any pleasure experienced would have been the tranquil joy of being obedient to God's will.

³³Augustine, *Epistle 6*, VIII, in Clark, *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*, 104. Also, *City of God*, XIV.16.

³⁴Augustine, *Excellence of Widowhood*, IV, in Clark, *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*, 79.

³⁵Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.17.

the other ends. In conclusion then, let us look more closely at how Augustine's views of order and sexuality were interrelated.

First of all, Augustine's placement of God in the order affected where he placed sexuality. Augustine had a high view of a God who was unknowable and immutable. With this unchanging God resided perfect order and perfect joy. Movement away from God became a movement away from that order. Sex had a place in the universe as did the bodies that performed it, a place defined by function. However, because the order was created by God, any departure from it was seen as estrangement from God. This estrangement first emerged in the human soul's original sin against God, but now could be seen in the chaotic lust of the genitals. According to Augustine, then, the sexuality we experience in this life is not the sexuality that God created as good; it is disordered in all its forms though acceptable for procreation and excused within the marriage of man and woman.

Sexuality in Augustine's order was confined to one purpose: procreation. When it moved beyond that purpose it moved out of the order and became so disordered that even when it was used for its proper purpose it was infused with the sin that originally corrupted it, transferring it to the next generation. This situation was of course temporary, for, in the resurrection, bodies would rise again with genitals intact, concupiscence gone, and the humans in complete control of their bodies. Yet because there would no longer be a purpose for sexuality it would no longer be needed in the City of God. From the beginning then, Augustine considered sexuality as only a temporary part of the order, useful in its time, yet to be discarded when it had completed its purpose.

Augustine's experiences with sexuality undoubtedly guided him as he named the disorder and order he perceived, providing language for definition and description. This description of the metaphysical order was rooted very much in the physical experience of (male) human bodies. Sex became the primary lens through which Augustine, as well as those theologians who followed him, ultimately characterized this order. The human sexual state was all the proof he needed to condemn humanity to its just punishment, for it represented the rebellion of the soul against the God of creation. In this way, sex became a theological concept as symbol, as evidence, and as a paradigm of human sinfulness.

Given this understanding of order, one might say that for Augustine, order itself rather than sexuality represented the ultimate erotic pleasure. Order was the peaceful intensity and the fully rational experience of joyful bliss that comes through knowing God. One could even go so far as to describe Augustine's portrayal of life in this order as an eternal yet purely rational orgasm, a pleasure both permanently intense and serenely stable in a life completely obedient to the soul as the soul is obedient to the Supreme God. This was an order created by a rational God who loved not with human emotion but with an ordered will. Outside of this order existed only God's condemnation and punishment. In this order existed God's love. And because this order was perceived first with the external senses, the

physical world became the criterion for understanding the order and thus God's love. Order, centered on proper use of the material world, was Augustine's ultimate criterion for defining and structuring all relational love, including sexual love.

To conclude, Augustine's concepts of order and sexuality are deeply interrelated in his theology and are still embedded in contemporary Christian theology and human society. This comes not without a price, however. Despite Augustine's recognition that sexuality was an intended part of God's good creation, the order he arranged condemned sexuality to a place of degradation and disgust by making it the primary window through which Christians and consequently much of the Western world view the "sin-sick" soul. And although he rescued the *created* body from the evils of the Manichean and Platonic flesh, the order he arranged returned a *sinful* body to a place of suspicion and renunciation. Augustine may not have intended the negative results of his theology, but we must hold him, and those who followed him, accountable lest we fail to learn what damage our ideas can do to those who do not fit our vision of the order of things.

Perhaps we might seek instead a new understanding of order and sexuality that recognizes Augustine's passion for God's peace and harmony without using a physically based hierarchical order that has caused so much sorrow among those perceived to be on the outside of this order. One possibility may be to retain Augustine's approach to sex and order using instead a modern vision of the physical world to define order and thus sexuality. Another possibility is to remove order from the discussion altogether, perhaps replacing it with a publicly defined understanding of love (lest love become merely subjectively understood), so that love rather than the order of things defines our sexual relationships. A third alternative is a relational approach, reminiscent of Augustine's method, where love and order define each other in ongoing interaction. In this approach, however, it is the "law of love," and not the physical order of things, that stands as the criterion above any order and points to a loving order where God's call to serve the neighbor ultimately shapes our many relationships, including how we relate sexually.³⁶ In this last alternative, I suggest, we can find an appreciation of order and sexuality that avoids the problematic letter of Augustine's ordered law and highlights instead the gospel spirit behind his passionate vision of God. ⊕



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³⁶See Martin Luther, *Confession concerning Christ's Supper* (1528), in LW 37:365, and *Preface to the Old Testament* (1545 [1523]), in LW 35:240–248.