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Christian and/or Pagan Identities and Their Relationship with the Spiritual Training in Augustine's *Sermones ad populum*

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I INTRODUCTION

In contributing to the debate on changes of the Christian world in late antiquity, some scholars have claimed that the boundaries between the religious group were blurred with shifting, in that, for instance, the identity of Christians was not characterised by clear indications of belief, observance, and practice. Some recent surveys have shown that the difference between pagans and Christians can be seen as part of a discursive binary.¹ While the North African evidence allows us to consider the question of what it meant to be a Christian, it is admitted that there was a comprehensive frame for the understanding of human behaviour: the spiritual training in the Greco-Roman tradition. What did Augustine think of the training? This question has received frequent attention in Augustinian scholarship, particularly in Pierre Hadot's work, where he illustrates a complex set of mode of the 'spiritual exercises' and defines it as a 'metamorphosis of our personality'.² Although some scholars have primarily considered it to be the purely intellectual training of the mind, Hadot emphasises the need to investigate its wider diversity and the purgation of the soul within the context of involving all facets of human thought and behaviour. A modification of the training in question appeared in late antiquity, more specifically, from the mid-fourth century in more detail than before. A crucial stage of the development seems to be prepared by Augustine. It seems to be legitimate to revisit the subject in his works. The intention of this paper is, therefore, to focus on the evidence for the Christian and/or pagan identities in Augustine's *Sermones ad populum*, thereby coming to some understanding of the horizons on which he made use of the aspect and goal in speaking about spiritual training. I shall first examine how he referred to the Christian code of behaviour in his preachings, and then I shall ask what Augustine understood by the spiritual training. Finally, I shall consider the principal feature of

¹ R. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990); M. Kahlos, *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures, c. 360–430* (Aldershot, 2007); and E. Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE* (Ithaca, 2012).

² P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. M. Chase (Oxford, 1995) 82 and 127.

spiritual training from the viewpoint of its significance and limit for the constructive guidance necessary to form the Christian identity that Augustine hoped for.

2 CHRISTIANS AND THE PLURALITY OF THEIR IDENTITIES

My account of the Christian identity begins by addressing the claim that there should be no dividing line between the catechumen and the faithful. In *Sermo* 352A (= Dolbeau 14), preached in Carthage in the summer of 397, Augustine explains the passage from Mark 1:15, ‘repent and believe in the gospel’. While ‘Believe in gospel’ is directed to unbelievers, ‘repent’ is towards catechumens and some of the faithful. To the possible objection from a catechumen who hopes to maintain the current status by preferring the lesser demands, he asks the audience to respond to the gospel’s call for repentance.

I’ll say to both sorts [*scil.* the faithful and catechumen], ‘Change your way of life, in case you lose your life. Condemn past sins, fear the evil things that are going to come, hope for the good things.’³

In his moral discourse, he never excludes ‘the catechumens and the careless ones among the faithful’ from his treatment of all Christians.⁴ His focus on a common identity among the congregation is also taken from *Sermo* 301A (= Denis 17), preached in 399 at Bulla Regia (an inland town in Numidia, about 130 miles west of Carthage). We see him talking to the Christians of the town, who were still inclined to do bad deeds such as those enjoying pagan spectacles. Augustine refers to the false division between clergy and laity and explains the reason for his criticising their theatre attendance.

And this is done by Christians; I’d rather not say, and by the faithful. A catechumen, perhaps, has a low opinion of his worth. ‘I’m just a catechumen,’ he says. . . . Do you have one forehead on which you received the sign of Christ, and another which you carry along to the theater? Do you want to go? Change your forehead, and get along there.⁵

Augustine’s insistence on the inclusion of both the catechumen and the faithful into the same membership is clearly confirmed: ‘I’m exhorting you all, addressing you all.’⁶

Despite of his continued assertion, some Christians would apply principles of action selectively, thus resulting in an inconsistency of membership. *Sermo* 62, preached around 399 to the Christians of Carthage, provides an exposition of 1 Corinthians 8:10–12, in which Augustine takes his cue from the Pauline epistle and enjoins them

³ Aug. *Serm.* 352A.5, WSA 3/11, 89.

⁴ Aug. *Serm.* 352A.3, WSA 3/11, 89.

⁵ Aug. *Serm.* 301A.8, WSA 3/8, 297.

⁶ Aug. *Serm.* 301A.8, WSA 3/8, 297.

to show restraint in performing pagan rituals. He begins by rejecting the justification offered by the ‘strong’ in 1 Corinthians, because, while keeping their faith, some Christians claim that they can participate in banquet in the pagan temple. Augustine opposes this view.

Do you ever wonder how people may be led astray by images, which they imagine are being honored by Christians? ‘God knows my mind,’ he says. But your brother doesn’t know your mind. If you are weak yourself, beware of catching a worse illness still; if you are strong, be careful of your brother’s weakness.⁷

Indeed, their obligation to the social contact of client and patron allows them to go to pagan temples and justify their engagement in the satisfaction of their patron’s demands. In the latter part of the sermon, Augustine raises some objections: he regards a generous offer from a patron to attend a banquet as an inappropriate trial of pagan worship. Such an emphasis on the pressure from a superior leads to the comparison between the superior and the persecutor in pagan times. But although he encourages the audience to retain the consistency of their Christian identity, they do not express more concern about the religious principle of behaviour. They would prefer to fulfil their social obligations, as the occasion may require.

Another indication of the Christian identity is given by the fact that, because of their close connection with each other in the community, their identity was fostered through the intersection of their social networks. In some sermons, where he refers to Christians on their deathbed, Augustine describes them as those whose principle of action sometimes creates tension with their neighbours and family. In *Sermo* 335D (= Lambot 6) preached in Hoppo Regious perhaps at a suburban parish in or after 424 or 425, Augustine exhorts his congregation on a possible way of sharing the benefit of martyrs, even though there is now no persecution of the church. An appeal to the imitation of the martyrs is repeatedly linked with a vivid illustration of the situation in which a critically ill patient is lying on his sickbed and people are gathering at the bedside. When they find that his health deteriorates even further, they may ask diviners for help and seek out the astrologers. People would suggest that the patient hang charms around his neck.

But the one who says, ‘I won’t do it’—when a friend suggests it, a neighbor mutters something about it, or a neighbor’s maid, sometimes even his own old nurse—who says, ‘I won’t do it; I’m a Christian. God prohibits this sort of thing. These are the sacraments of demons. Listen to the apostle: I do not wish you to become the associates of demons (1 Cor 10:20)’—well, he gets this answer from the one who is suggesting it: ‘Do it, and you’ll get well. So-and-so and such-and-such did it. What? Aren’t they Christians? Aren’t they believers? Don’t they hurry off to church? And yet they did it and got well.’⁸

⁷ Aug. *Serm.* 62.7, WSA 3/3, 159.

⁸ Aug. *Serm.* 335D.3, WSA 3/9, 230.

In the final part of the sermon, Augustine relates the behaviour of the old nurse again: ‘... bringing wax and an egg in her hand and saying, “Do this and get better. Why prolong your illness? Tie on this amulet. I heard someone invoke the name of God and the angels over it and you will get better”.’⁹ It is not explicitly stated that she is not a Christian. Or she has already known that some Christians refused to tie an amulet on their bodies. All the same, there were circumstances in which the Christian identity could not serve as a guiding principle of behaviour in their community.

3 SPIRITUAL TRAINING IN THE SERMONS OF AUGUSTINE

Augustine gives a clear picture of his experience with Christians whose religious identity resulted in no conflict with their civic obligations: they ‘activate different allegiances, depending on the different contexts of interaction’.¹⁰ While there was a distinctive focus on the maintenance of the social network, apart from Augustine’s continued concern about how to integrate a way of Christian living, it seems to be of little interest to be conscious of the incongruity between religious and secular activities. As a bishop who confronted the vicissitudes of his life, Augustine was eager to provide the means of directing the congregation towards the change of their lifestyle. But how does he show us a way of considering the significance of spiritual training?

In *Sermo* 50, dating from the period before 396, against the Manichaeans, Augustine expounds the passage from Haggai 2:8, ‘The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts.’ Although the place where he preached this sermon cannot be determined, it is clearly admitted that Augustine begins by criticising Manichaean exegesis for simply comparing the outwardly contradicting verses. While pointing to the Mammon of iniquity in Luke 16:9 as driving the avarice, Manichaeans regard it as the seemingly earthly property in Haggai 2:8. But, Augustine’s reply to their criticism against the prophet indicates another way of finding the value of having worldly possession.

As the divine justice distributes its property, good deeds are thereby publicized and sins are thereby punished. Gold and silver, you see, and every kind of earthly possession are both a means of exercising humanity (*humanitas*) and of punishing greed.¹¹

Mine, he says, is the gold and mine is the silver, not yours, you wealthy ones of the earth.¹²

This possession has to be seen as the one that God bestowed them. His solution puts an emphasis on offering the possibility that all humans (*humanitas*) would be exercised by sharing of their ‘earthly’ property without imposing severe constraints on themselves. He does not compel the audience to do total renunciation. It is not their

⁹ Aug. *Serm.* 335D.5, WSA 3/9, 232.

¹⁰ E. Rebillard, ‘Religious Sociology: Being Christian in the Time of Augustine’, in M. Vessey (ed.), *A Companion to Augustine* (West Sussex, 2012) 52.

¹¹ Aug. *Serm.* 50.3, WSA 3/2, 345.

¹² Aug. *Serm.* 50.2, WSA 3/2, 344.

real possessions that Augustine directs close attention to but the inward disposition of the soul. In the face of Manichaeans' criticism, he focuses on the necessity of the exercises (*exercitatio humanitatis*), thereby preparing for purging themselves of the daily sins. This ascetic exhortation is addressed to the whole of his audience, as his sermons clearly form the intention of stressing the unity of his congregation and reinforcing an awareness of common membership. Indeed, not only the Manichaeans, but in particular the Donatists, whose influence has been extensive with the support of local leaders, have been dangerous for the Catholic communities in North Africa.

In several sermons Augustine suggests that, despite the objection from Christians whose arrangement of the religious and secular realm provide a frame for their way of life, there nevertheless exists a way of the change of their lifestyle. In *Sermo 335D* mentioned above, in which he advocates the imitation of martyrs, after admiring the behaviour of an ill patient, Augustine compares those gathered at the deathbed of a Christian to 'flesh and blood . . . raging against the holy martyrs' based on the interpretation of a passage from Ephesians 6:12, 'Your conflict is not against flesh and blood'.¹³ 'Flesh' and 'blood', they represent mortal human beings who adhere to their way of life. Augustine urges them to integrate their principle of action.

Why is it, brother, that you are raging, why are you so churned up? It's against me, indeed, that you're raging, but yourself that you're losing. Oh, if only you would change your frame of mind! (*O si mutes mentem!*) Oh, if only you would change your way of life! (*O si mutes vitam!*) Because we are all going to die and rise again. I, indeed, place my hopes in God, for whose sake I am suffering these things.¹⁴

The same process towards divine hope is found in *Sermo 352A* (Dolbeau 14), where Augustine emphasises a common identity of his congregation, thereby enhancing the security for the future repose.

Change your way of life, in case you lose your life. Condemn past sins, fear the evil things that are going to come, hope for the good things. The bad man should begin by not contradicting himself in hoping for good things, while not being good himself. You're hoping for the good; be hope what you hope for.¹⁵

In *Sermo 360b* (Dolbeau 25), preached at the small town of Boseth in 404, he refers to the attendance of pagans in his congregation. At the end of this sermon, after the dismissal of the catechumens and pagans, the mass was performed by the deacon. It is noteworthy that, not only after their leaving does he give a short exhortation in favour of 'leading good lives,'¹⁶ but also in the middle of his discourse Augustine stresses the necessity for 'the eye of the mind and heart'¹⁷ to be inwardly purified towards the whole of his congregation. Having 'that inner eye cleansed'¹⁸ is an indi-

¹³ Aug. *Serm.* 335D.3, WSA 3/9, 231.

¹⁴ Aug. *Serm.* 335D.3, WSA 3/9, 231.

¹⁵ Aug. *Serm.* 352A.5, WSA 3/11, 89.

¹⁶ Aug. *Serm.* 360B.28, WSA 3/10, 383.

¹⁷ Aug. *Serm.* 360B.3, WSA 3/10, 367.

¹⁸ Aug. *Serm.* 360B.6, WSA 3/10, 369.

cation that the audience, not excluding pagans and catechumens, ‘all live in a manner worthy of God.’¹⁹

men ought ... to behave humbly before God, to entreat their creator, to confess their sins and groan over them, to tell their doctor of their sickness so that they may be inwardly cured, and have that inner eye cleansed, with which alone that light may be seen that never can be seen as long as a man’s inner eye is still that of “man.”²⁰

In some of his sermons, Augustine refers to the situation in which Christians provide a rationale from a passage in the scriptures for legitimising their behaviour. In *Sermo* 361 probably preached in 411, for instance, Augustine criticises the status quo: Christians were engaged in an advantageous use of the scriptural text in order to find support for the festival in honour of the dead, that is, the *parentalia*. They quote the passage from Tobit 4:17 as the evidence for this practice: ‘Break your bread and pour out your wine on the tombs of the just, but do not hand it over to the unjust’. After making an objection to their custom: ‘this doesn’t benefit the dead, ... it’s a custom of the pagans, ... it doesn’t flow from the channel of justice derived from our fathers the patriarchs,’²¹ Augustine takes a stand on the allegorical interpretation: the passage in question should be understood as the offering of mass for the dead. Their approach to seek the behavioural rules in the scriptures is not accepted. Although, in fact, such an attempt should not be denied, his concern for the side effect and difficulty of scriptural interpretation is made explicit.

So nobody should try to turn a remedy into a hurt, and attempt to twist a rope from the scriptures, and with it lob a deadly noose over his own soul.²²

It is noteworthy that he repeatedly speaks of the difficulty in interpretation and its relation to the significance of spiritual training. In *Sermo* 71, daring between 417 and 420, he deals with the passage of Matthew 12:32, ‘Whoever speaks a word against the holy spirit will not be forgiven, neither in this age nor in the age to come.’ Augustine takes up twice the strength of these exercises in this sermon, when he encounters considerable difficulty in exploring the meaning of the texts.

Obviously, what he [*scil.* God] wanted to do was to exercise our minds with a difficult problem not to deceive us with a false statement.²³

Actually in the whole wide field of the holy scriptures we are nourished by the passages that are clear, exercised by those that are obscure; the first kind relieve us from hunger, the second save us from boredom.²⁴

¹⁹ Aug. *Serm.* 360B.28, WSA 3/10, 383.

²⁰ Aug. *Serm.* 360B.6, WSA 3/10, 369.

²¹ Aug. *Serm.* 361.6, WSA 3/10, 228.

²² Aug. *Serm.* 361.A, WSA 3/10, 238.

²³ Aug. *Serm.* 71.10, WSA 3/3, 251.

²⁴ Aug. *Sermo* 71.11, WSA 3/2, 252.

The similar reference to its effect is found in *Sermo* 363, preached probably in Hippo Regius around 414. At the very beginning of this short sermon, once again he shows the double consequences of the exegesis.

we may deal faithfully both with what is said clearly for the purpose of giving us spiritual nourishment, and what is said obscurely in order to give us spiritual exercise.²⁵

In conjunction with the exegetical difficulty, Augustine draws a contrast between the literal and spiritual interpretation in some sermons. For instance, *Sermo* 23, preached at the Faustus Basilica in Carthage in 413, followed by the *Sermo* 53, treats with the vision of God. Augustine starts with a passage from 2 Timothy 3:16, 'Every divinely inspired scripture is useful for teaching, for reproof, for exhortation, for doctrine'. Although we cannot interpret the scriptural texts at all, we have no ground for accusing it. Thus, he regards the 'mental exercises' as those that prepare the exegetes to interpret spiritually the texts 'in a crude, materialistic way in many places'.²⁶ Again he appeals to the scriptural evidence from Romans 7:14, 'For the law is spiritual, but I am carnal'. Since the difficulties experienced by him in interpreting the scriptures are serious, he might be forced to understand the necessity and scope of these exercises.

A comprehensive aspect of the spiritual training and the transformation of the self in deepening levels of the spiritual life is found in some of his sermons. In *Sermo* 347, unfortunately its date uncertain, Augustine interprets the passage from Psalm 111:10, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.' Closely linked with questions of pneumatology, the imagery of growth in the spiritual life shows us his reflections on the ascent of the soul to God through the seven distinctive stages. The scriptural evidence for soul's return is provided from Isaiah 11:2-3 in which the prophet Isaiah, descending from his contemplation of God, enumerates the seven gifts of the Spirit, thereby showing them for guidance on people's ascent. He asks the congregation: 'where do we have to climb to?'

What can this place be, but the place of rest and peace? There, you see, is to be found that bright and never fading wisdom. So it was to exercise us in successive steps of doctrine that Isaiah came down from wisdom to fear, from the place, that is, of everlasting peace to the vale of time-bound tears; ...²⁷

This ascent is not made by the feet of the body, but by the affections of the heart. In his meditations on the ascending steps towards God, Augustine presents a series of the laborious task of penetrating spiritual realities as the spiritual care and training for the soul, thereby confirming the possibility of the inner dynamic of the transformation and renewal with the continued assistance from the Spirit. Humbled in

²⁵ Aug. *Serm.* 363.1, WSA 3/10, 270.

²⁶ Aug. *Serm.* 23.3, WSA 3/2, 57.

²⁷ Aug. *Serm.* 347.2, WSA 3/10, 88.

the fear of God, the soul finally approaches its purification and holds fast to the 'full and everlasting peace.'²⁸ Augustine does not consider it as a phasic representation of the spiritual life, which is made explicit in the passage of Isaiah, but as 'a progressive sequence in which every step must follow the one before'.²⁹ It is the spiritual progress of every individual which is crucial, while the messianic viewpoint in Isaiah concentrates on the radical change of society and the establishment of new social order. His emphasis is not on the method and knowledge of the ascent of the soul, but on the decisive effects of divine grace on individual souls.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

One would naturally expect Augustine's view of the spiritual training with a convergence towards the spiritual progress transformed by the role of the Spirit to be characterised by his pastoral experience and his increasing consciousness of the vicissitudes of his own life. Though the explanation given for this training is not a major focus of his preaching, it does not necessarily mean that the repeated exhortation has only the limited significance for him and his congregation. In particular, while some Christians were skilled at formulating a rationale from the scriptures for a justification of their behaviour, Augustine directs their attention to the side effect and complication of exegesis, thereby confirming the validity of the 'mental exercises' as enabling an exegete to make a successful spiritual interpretation. It must result in the ethically unified principle of behaviour: love of God and neighbour.³⁰ In fact, however, there were Christians whose religious identity was not in serious conflict with their social contact and network density. It looks as if they switched on different kinds of identity under different circumstances. Being confronted with the selection of multiple possibilities from their identity, 'Augustine does not agree with this' situation.³¹ It is important to note that, despite of his central claim that the Christian identity should be at the base of their identity, it could not respond to the social realities in late antiquity. Thus, when we attempt to read his sermons as a discourse replying to them by making the unity of his congregation, his teaching of the spiritual training would be considered to be a renewed impetus for the spiritual progress with an initiative in divine grace. As well as the confirmation of the role of the Spirit in the ascending step to God, the spiritual training for every individual soul seems to serve to fasten their affectionate relationship.

²⁸ Aug. *Serm.* 347.3, WSA 3/10, 90.

²⁹ K. Pollmann, 'Augustine's Hermeneutics as a Universal Discipline?', in K. Pollmann and M. Vessey (eds.), *Augustine and the Disciplines. From Cassiciacum to Confessions* (Oxford, 2005) 206–231 at 228.

³⁰ K. Pollmann, 'Augustine's Hermeneutics as a Universal Discipline?', 230.

³¹ E. Rebillard, 'Religious Sociology: Being Christian', 51.