

Augustine and the Quest for 'peace' in the Communities of Roman North Africa

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Introduction

Following the tradition of North African Christianity from the late second century, Augustine is consistent with the biblical consensus that idolatry is the primal expression of sin. While Augustine dealt with the critique of idolatry in the *City of God*, his concern is primarily with the 'peace' in the communities of Roman North Africa. Augustine seems to be reluctant to fix the issue when he reports some episodes of Christian attacks against the cult of statues in his sermons and letters. This paper considers the questions of whether there is a correlation between his critique of the pagan cults and his attitude towards Christian violence against pagans at the turn of the fifth century; how does Augustine construct 'peace' among citizens in which people pursue their hope on different dimensions.

The destruction of the pagan statues

The Theodosian Code has preserved a series of texts that were issued by Arcadius and Honorius in 399 for the destruction of temples and shrines in the West. These texts may arise from the circumstance that Christians had been campaigning for the imperial edict on their behalf, and the western court had been gradually coming to the same position. They may also be connected with Mallius Theodorus' entry upon the consulship for 399. Several weeks later in March, Honorius sent to Carthage two imperial agents, Gaudentius and Jovius, with the order to close temples and remove statues. While Christian leaders reported with exaggeration of the results as the destructive actions in North Africa, the imperial officials did not have a writ to do anything more than to remove the statues and idols from the temples. Furthermore, in the end of August, the emperors took a series of measures that temples were not to be immediately destroyed, and that the statues or idols were to be taken down only by state officials and only after proper investigation of their history. Also included in the law is a warning that the bishops of the Christian church must not stretch the imperial laws to justify the collective action of Christians.

A series of incidents has been construed as episodes that were attested to in letters and sermons of Augustine as the tensions and even violence in the aftermath of the mission of imperial officials in Carthage. Some scholars have seen in these episode examples of a fundamentally religious conflict between Christians and pagans.

In August of the same year, a riot occurred at the small town of Sufes. This town was located in the hinterland of the neighbouring province of Byzacena. The result was that the

statue of Hercules was destroyed by Christians, and at least sixty of them were killed in the ensuing riot. The usual response by the pagan civic leaders to control the disruption turned into a massacre by the townspeople. In reaction to an attempt to protect them from severe punishment, it is clear that Augustine submitted an indignant letter to the leaders of Sufes asking for the redress of their wrongs. He writes to them with lamenting that ‘innocent blood of brothers sixty in numbers has been shed’. While he denounces ‘the most notorious crime and unexpected cruelty of your savagery’,¹ Augustine’s anger is veiled by sarcasm and irony that ‘if anyone [*scil.* A citizen of Sufes] has killed more’ he would have been praised and exalted to the place of honour by the leading members of the city. However, indeed, he did not call for severe punishment. Augustine was careful neither to deliberately ignore nor provoke retaliation against the actions of a frenzied mob. In a sermon delivered in Carthage in 401, it is also evident that he intends to control such popular recourse to violence and rejected unauthorised trials to smash pagan idols.

Many pagans have these abominations on their own estates. Do we march right in and smash them up? The first thing we try to do is to break the idols in their hearts. When they too become Christians, they either invite us in to perform this good work, or else they get in first with it before us. The thing we have to do now is pray for them, not get angry with them.²

It is very likely that Augustine’s concern for the restraint of Christians in both Sufes and Carthage was linked with an appreciation of the imperial warning given at the end of August 399. Those reservations would be taken seriously. He seems not to be convinced of the power of coercion and restraint in his preaching.

Another episode connected with a statue of Hercules is known through a sermon preached in Carthage in 401. This sermon dealt with a situation that had involved a series of events and Christian rioting concerning the statue. The statue was perhaps located in a public space and, although it is not sure by whom it was proposed, an appeal to the newly arrived governor of the province that it should have its beard gilded had been authorised by him. Its restoration was immediately regarded by Christians in Carthage as a provocative act and resulted in a violent act in which Christians ‘shaved’ the gilded beard off the statue of Hercules.³ This incident ignited parts of the Christian people who were not yet satisfied with the act of mutilation. They were eager to be ready for more substantial action. Augustine was struggling to prevent any escalation in the Basilica at Carthage. However, violent chanting took over the church: ‘Like Rome, like Carthage’; all the temples have been closed, and idols had been smashed at Rome, and so should be done at Carthage, they claimed.⁴ In the competitive atmosphere, his sermon was preached: the focus would be rather placed on the unity among all Christians, the same aim to be shared by the congregation and the bishops. Am I saying ‘Stop wanting what you want’? On the contrary, we must be thankful that you want what God wants, That every superstition of the pagans and the Gentiles should be abolished is what God

¹ Aug. *Ep.* 50; CCSL 31, 214; WSA 2/1, 197.

² Aug. *Serm.* 62.17; CCSL 41Aa, 311; WSA 3/3, 165.

³ Aug. *Serm.* 24.6; CCSL 41, 332; WSA 3/2, 77.

⁴ Aug. *Serm.* 24.6; CCSL 41, 331; WSA 3/2, 76.

wants, God has ordered, God has foretold, God has begun to bring about, and in many parts of the world has already in great measure achieved.⁵

He does neither admit the demand for further action nor try to calm the crowd. Instead, it seems that he intentionally arouse their acclamations. While the acclamations were probably informed to the governor, there is no evidence that the chanting crowd was responsible for the mutilation. Further, there is no report of gatherings outside the Basilica. There is no reason, therefore, to see this episode as an explosion of violence that was part of a series of Christian attacks against pagan statues. Certainly, Augustine attempted to deploy the unity of his congregation as the fostering of Christian identity. Although the effect was transitory, it would be possible to interpret his sermon as an effort to both draw the boundary with pagans and calibrate an articulated vision of a Christian community.

Augustine's critique of the cult of statues

It is made clear from these narratives that at the turn of the fifth century Augustine had reservations about the destruction of pagan statues, certainly hostile to spontaneous iconoclasm, and reluctant to be a convinced advocate of coerced treatment. It is interesting to note that, in a significantly changed circumstance that the temples had been closed and the statues removed, that is, when Christians were no longer exposed to the actual danger of participating in the worship of idols, Augustine continued to be devoted to the critique of the cult of statues.

It had been suggested that Augustine had less concern with pagan religious practices and beliefs of his time and had only limited knowledge about them. Indeed, he did not explain the details of the contemporary paganism. Because he did not realise the fact that Varro's material on religion in the *Rerum diuinarm libri* has no relevance to contemporary realities, but it would instead provide a reconstruction of early Roman religion. However, some scholars have claimed that in the *City of God* Augustine provides a vivid description of the trend in the paganism of the early fifth century. Besides, he came into contact with some refugees (the cultured noblemen of Rome) in Carthage after the sack of Rome. Thus far, he must have searched for a new approach to the criticism of paganism, which would be connected with Varro's antiquarian depiction of Roman religion. Varro was regarded as an authority on religious matters by pagans contemporary with Augustine, including an audience of his preaching. Indeed, in his sermons, Augustine is concerned about the heart of the cult of statues and the defence and its plausible interpretation.

A sermon was preached in Carthage on New Year's day of 404. This is one of the longest sermons of Augustine to survive. His arguments against the interpretation of idols and its exceptional length share a purpose: clearly, he intended to keep his congregation in the church from joining in the festivities of the Calends. While the suggestion that coercion should be used to ensure pagan conversion is not found, the arguments of learned pagans to refute the attacks of Christians against the cult of statues motivate the critique of Augustine.

⁵ Aug. *Serm.* 24.6; CCSL 41, 331; WSA 3/2, 76.

[I]n order to give a learned and apparently sensible interpretation of their idols, they take refuge in *the elements of the world*. You find fault with someone for worshiping an idol, and it's clear that he really does venerate the idol; the thing itself is there to convict him, and that precisely is the object of his affection, the actual idol; that's what he relies on to grant his requests. But what does the seemingly cleverer and better educated pagan say to you? 'Uneducated pagans do this, so that they venerate the idol as if it were itself divine, just as your people also do, those who venerate the columns in the church.'⁶

Augustine does not deny the fact that some Christians follow these practices. But he also confirms that the leaders of the church condemn them.

[...] this is not what the Church teaches you. I mean, which priest of theirs ever climbed into a pulpit and from there commanded the people not to adore idols, in the way that we, in Christ, publicly preach against the adoration of columns or of the stones of buildings in holy places, or even of pictures? On the contrary indeed, it was their very priests who used to turn to the idols and offer them victims for their congregations, and would still like to do so now.⁷

The remark about some form of pagan religious teaching is reflected in the letter written to Nectarius, in which Augustine complains that he 'heard that such sound interpretations are read out to the people gathered in the temples.'⁸ Another allusion is found in his sermon 62, where Augustine addresses to his congregation concerning the dangers they are involved when they take part in the banquets in temples: in particular, they might attend to the teachings contrary to the doctrine of the church.

The doctrine of Christ does not make room for this doctrine. I want to know where you learned that Christ is not God. It's what the pagans usually say; do you see the result of these bad dinner parties? Do you see how bad company corrupts good morals? You can't speak about the gospel there, and you listen to them speaking about idols. You lose sight there of the truth that Christ is God, and what you drink there you spew up in the Church.⁹

The story presented by him supposes that the comments of a theological nature were made at banquets. These passages seem to refer to contexts in which a pagan religious discourse could attract a wider audience than the circles of the educated. This indicates that the knowledge of interpretations of the Varronian was not necessarily confined to the educated.

In *Exposition of the Psalm 96*, where he explains verse 7 ('Let all who worship graven images be put to shame'), and he introduces an argumentative interlocutor.

But then some argumentative fellow stands up, someone who fancies himself learned, and objects, 'I do not worship a stone, nor an image devoid of intelligence. If your prophet perceived that these things have eyes but see not, how is it possible that I could have failed to realize that an image has no soul, and is incapable of seeing with its eyes or hearing with its ears? Of course I do not worship it. But I reverence what I see, and serve one whom I do not see.' And who is that? 'Some invisible deity (*numen*)

6 Aug. *Serm.* 198 auct. (*Serm. Dolbeau* 26).10; WSA 3/11, 188.

7 Aug. *Serm.* 198 auct. (*Serm. Dolbeau* 26).16; WSA 3/11, 193.

8 Aug. *Ep.* 91.5.

9 Aug. *Serm.* 62.9.

who presides over the image,' he replies. In attempting to justify their images in this way they think themselves sophisticated, because they do not worship idols. But in fact they worship demons.¹⁰

Some scholars have suggested that he is referring to the interpretations of an anonymous, specific author, that is, Varro. But, Augustine appears to be mocking people who only repeat learned interpretations as if they were their own. Accordingly, the word 'numen' does not seem to be found in Varro.

Concerning the critique of the cult of statues, a comparison with the sermons suggests that there was a rather wide knowledge of the interpretations Augustine attacks in the *City of God*. These were used by both pagans and former pagans to defend themselves from mockery that the idols were insensible and mute stone. Augustine's critique is directed to them, although his audience could not appreciate and only echo these interpretations as the teaching of Varro.

Concluding remarks

Seen through the lens of his critique of pagan religious teaching, it appears that Augustine attempts to engage in conflict and controversy with pagans contemporary with himself. To understand that his goal is polemical is indispensable to attach the real significance to his treatment with contemporary religious practices and beliefs. However, this does not mean that his critique of the cult of statues was unconnected with the restraint of Christians in his narratives of violence. Indeed, while in these narratives the focus is directed to the maintenance of a resolute sense of boundedness, there seems to be a scenario being eager for the restoration and protection of peace and order in the community. Its condition is satisfied by the circumstance in which the religious elements were so mundane that the two sides—pagans and Christians—lived side by side and did not seriously threaten one another with violence. For Augustine, what mattered was the stimulation and guidance of this sense of separateness and difference.

¹⁰ Aug. *En. Ps.* 96.11; WSA 3/18, 448.