

Christian and/or Pagan Identities in the Sermons of Augustine

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INTRODUCTION

In contributing to the debate on the nature of changes of the Christian world in late antiquity, some scholars have claimed that the boundaries between religious groups were blurred, in that, for instance, the identity of Christians in the late Roman world was not characterised by clear indications of religious belief, observance, and practice. After an intriguing contribution to the discussion of the Christian identity,¹ more recent interesting surveys have shown that the difference between Christians and pagans can be seen as part of a discursive binary.² It is interesting to note that the North African evidence of the identity of Christians allows us to examine the question of what it meant to be a Christian. Hence, in this paper I shall confine myself to some *sermones ad populum* of Augustine. For the sake of the argument, I shall divide these *sermones* into two groups according to their chronological development, and in each group examine how he imposes his idea of the Christian code of behaviour on his congregation.

SERMONES AD POPULUM PREACHED AROUND 400

The first group of Augustine's *sermones ad populum* to be considered can be dated to the period between 397 and 401, in which they provide us with a detailed sense of what it meant to be a Christian.

Sermo 94A (= Dolbeau 14), preached in Carthage in the summer of 397, contains the exposition of a passage from Mark 1:15, 'repent and believe in the gospel'. While 'Believe in gospel' is directed to unbelievers, 'repent' is directed to catechumens and some of the faithful. Despite the possible objection from a catechumen who hopes to maintain the current status by preferring the lesser demands made of catechumens, Augustine asks his entire congregation to respond to the gospel's call for repentance.

1. Robert Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

2. Mijastina Kahlos, *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures, c. 360–430*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007; Éric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012.

I'll say to both sorts [*scil.* the faithful and catechumens], '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 preaching, Augustine never excludes 'the catechumens and the careless ones among the faithful'⁴ from his treatment of all Christians. In *Sermo* 301A (= Denis 17), preached in 399 at Bulla Regia (an inland town in Numidia, about 130 miles west of Carthage), we see Augustine preaching to the Christians of the city, who were still inclined to do bad deeds, such as these enjoying pagan spectacles.⁵ He refers to the false division between clergy and laity and then explains the reason for 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.⁶

Augustine emphasises the inclusiveness of all Christians in his statement: 'I'm exhorting you all, addressing you all'.⁷

Sermo 62, preached around 399 in Carthage, provides an exposition of 1 Corinthians 8:10--12, in which Augustine takes his cue from the Pauline passages and enjoins Christians at Carthage to show restraint in resisting pagan rituals. He begins by rejecting the justification offered by the 'strong' in 1 Corinthians, because some Christians claim that they can participate in banquets held in pagan temples while keeping their faith. Although idols could be considered as mere things, Augustine opposes their 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.⁸

It is noteworthy that they hold their own view regarding pagan observances. Indeed, because of their obligations in the social networks of clients and patrons, Christians would go to pagan temples. They justified this involvement in order to satisfy their patrons' demands.⁹ Thus, in the latter part of this sermon, Augustine enumerates his objections, which regards a generous offer from a patron to attend a banquet as an

3. *Serm.* 94A.5.

4. *Serm.* 94A.3.

5. See *Serm.* 301A.7.

6. *Serm.* 301A.8.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Serm.* 62.7.

9. See *Serm.* 62.8.

inappropriate trial of pagan worship. His emphasis on the pressures from a superior (*maior*) results in the comparison between the superior and the persecutor in pagan times.¹⁰ But, although he encourages the audience to retain their Christian identity, the crucial point in this case is that some Christians do not adhere to their consistent, religious principle of behaviour. They would prefer to fulfil their social obligations, as the occasion requires.

In Carthage on two consecutive Sundays, most probably in 401, Augustine preached two sermons—*Sermo* 24 and 279. Before *Sermo* 24 was given there, people knew that the pagan cult was no longer practised in Rome. So the Carthaginian Christians had attacked a statue of Hercules whose golden beard they had shaved off. The crowd did not hesitate to show their enthusiasm by shouting a slogan, ‘Like Rome, like Carthage’, against the ‘superstitious worship of demons’.¹¹ Conflict inevitably arose between the Christians and pagans. Although Augustine praises the crowd gathered in the church and provokes them: ‘If the business has gone ahead in the head of the nations, are the members not to follow?’,¹² he attempts to recover balance between the ‘holy zeal’¹³ of his audience and the restrained control of the authorities. This sermon reveals that Augustine is highly skilled at dealing with the crowd. However, it is not likely that this incident was limited within the church. Provided that he could succeed in organising a Christian group on the day the sermon was preached, does it actually mean that people act as a group according to their religious affiliation? In *Sermo* 279 given on the following Sunday, Augustine talked about the conversion of Faustinus upon request from Aurelius, the bishop of Carthage. Faustinus was a distinguished banker responsible for tax collection. He had expressed a hostile attitude towards the church. People raised doubt about his suspicious conversion, yet Augustine claimed that only God ‘can see into the heart of a new Christian’.¹⁴ It is interesting to see how he controls and regulates the audience during his sermon: they yelled and shouted acclamations with his approval. They appear to act as a Christian group in the church. But, no evidence exists that, once his preaching ended, there is a continued group activity based on their religious membership.

SERMONES AD POPULUM PREACHED AROUND 420

The second group of the *sermones ad populum* is situated in the period between 416/417 and 428, in which Augustine’s *sermones* share a similar concern about a sense of what it meant to be a Christian as the first group does.

10. See *Serm.* 62.15.

11. *Serm.* 24.6.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Serm.* 24.5.

14. *Serm.* 279.10.

Sermo 96 is dated to 416 or 417 and is a commentary on both Mark 8:34 and 1 John 2:15, the former of which, at the end of the sermon, Augustine explains from the ecclesiastical viewpoint. He states that the ecclesiastical hierarchy, such as the monks, lay people, bishops, and clergy, does not correspond to a calling for salvation through Christ.

the universal Church, the whole body, all its members distinguished from each other by the various offices they have been properly allotted, they all ought to follow Christ.¹⁵

The sequence of the addresses were divided between those who were required to meet a strict standard, such as monks and clergy, and those whose regulations were relatively flexible. Despite his affirmation of the general instruction, it is more than likely that, under their social obligations, lay people could make a choice whether or not to maintain lower standards. This is the same with the scriptural interpretation of Luke 17:3--4, which was given in *Sermo* 114 delivered during his last visit to Carthage in 424. Augustine emphasises his general calling for repentance, as has been referred to in his early sermon.¹⁶ Then, along with the categorical enumeration as mentioned above, that is, the lay people, monks or nuns, clergy, bishops, and apostles, he suggests that 'as it is, whoever you are, you are human. You may be a just person, you're human'.¹⁷ Augustine firmly holds that Christians should not regard this appeal as only applicable in exceptional cases.

In *Sermo* 335D (= Lambot 6), preached in Hippo Regius perhaps at a suburban parish in or after 424 or 425, Augustine admonishes his congregation on the possible way of sharing the benefits of the martyrs, even though there are no persecutions in these times. An appeal to the imitation of the martyrs is repeatedly linked with the situation in which Christians are lying on their sickbeds. He provides a vivid illustration of people gathered at the bedside of critically ill patients. When patients find that their health deteriorates even further, they might ask diviners for help and seek out the astrologers. People at the bedside would suggest that the patients hang charms around their necks.

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.'¹⁸

15. *Serm.* 96.9.

16. See *Serm.* 301A.

17. *Serm.* 114.4.

18. *Serm.* 335D.3.

In the final part of this 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"'.¹⁹ 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.

In *Sermo* 286, preached in 428 for the birthday of the Milanese martyrs Protasius and Gervasius, Augustine gives another example of the Christian on his sickbed with his acquaintances at the bedside. In this episode, Augustine pays his attention both to the 'trial and temptation by tongue'²⁰ by some visitors and the longing for a martyr's death. A group of people who have personal and intimate relationship 'approaches the sickbed, and says to the sick man, "Tie on that *muti* [*scil.* magic charm], and you will get better; let them apply that charm, and you will get better. [...]" He doesn't yield, he doesn't agree, he doesn't give his consent; he has to struggle, all the same. He has no struggle, and he conquers the devil. He becomes a martyr on his sickbed, and he is crowned by the one who hung for him on the tree'.²¹ Augustine suggests that their daily relationship with family and neighbourhood is not principally formed from the Christian code of behaviour. They would rather follow the rules of their community, which cannot be integrated into Christian belief. In these cases, that is, in *Sermo* 335D and 286, Augustine seems to indicate that the religious identity of family members and neighbours is Christian, but not pagan. Thus, these examples of the conflict between the identity of patients lying on the beds and others who do not abide by their religious affiliation show us the multiple principles of action in their community.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

These *sermones ad populum* I have considered so far provide the confirmation that, despite the fact that the second group of the *sermones* was preached about twenty years after the first group he delivered, Augustine consistently claims and encourages his congregation that Christians should conform to the same principle of behaviour according to their Christian identity. Although people assembled in the church sometimes show the social and/or close relationships, such as those of clients and patrons and of them and their counsellors, in which members are beneficial to one another on an inadequate basis for their religious membership, Augustine repeatedly criticises their participation in these communal activities. But the realities to which he refers in these *sermones* are complicated. People living in late antique society are set in mutually different and often multiple contexts of action. Thus, as Éric Rebillard has

19. *Serm.* 335D.5.

20. *Serm.* 286.7.

21. *Serm.* 286.7.

mentioned in the conclusion of his monograph,²² the 'axiomatic' division between the religious and secular realm in the society needs further investigation.

It is clearly admitted that, while he continues his efforts to exhort them to consider faith to be primarily chosen, Christians always make explicit the multiple identities in their response to the bishop's admonitions. A gap has existed between his viewpoint and that of his audience. Over half of his forty year ecclesiastical career, faced with many similar difficulties in handling their social obligations, Augustine did not make any compromises which may have affected their preference for civic networks. For his concerns with the identity conflict underlay a wider set of anthropological, spiritual, and theological concerns. However, many of the congregation did not hold the same framework. His efforts to impose the Christian code of behaviour did not create a dramatic tension. It is probably because their religious identity is, as well as other social memberships, given as a choice factor. Then, how did Augustine think about the formation and the possibility of voluntary reconfiguration of their multiple identities? It also needs further investigation.

22. Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 91.