

3-1-1992

Misogyny in Augustine and Sexist Scholarship

Richard J. McGowan
Saint Joseph's College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr>

Recommended Citation

McGowan, Richard J. (1992) "Misogyny in Augustine and Sexist Scholarship," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 21: No. 3, Article 9.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol21/iss3/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Dayton Review by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

MISOGYNY IN AUGUSTINE AND SEXIST SCHOLARSHIP

Richard J. McGowan

Our ideal performance as researchers and our actual performance as researchers do not always coincide. There are occasions when we allow bias or ideology to intrude on scholarship, trampling truth in the process. The intrusions into good scholarship by bias are frequently found in women's studies. In the past, the fashion was for scholars to interpret whatever liberating ideas a thinker advanced in light of the scholars' own male bias. Thus, any enlightened notions on woman were thought of as uncharacteristic anomalies, ill-meant and easily dismissed. As Christine Pierce pointed out over ten years ago, scholars interpreted Plato's *Republic*, book V, 451c ff., as though Plato's words did not mean what they said.¹ Pierce says that "much Platonic scholarship on this passage in *Rep. V* is a set of variations on the theme of the essential inferiority of women and the consequent necessity of recognizing that inferiority in the social, economic, and political structure of a society."² Despite the clarity and force of Plato on woman in the ideal society, scholars insisted he could not have taken seriously any idea other than that women are inferior and should be treated as such. Pierce rightly points out that this kind of scholarship neither approximates the ideal of research nor serves the cause of truth, and she concludes: "Philosophers have often been accused of defending the mores and beliefs of societies in which they lived as eternal truths...the same tendency may pervade philosophical scholarship."³

I submit that this same tendency still exists.

In the dozen or so intellectually tumultuous—at least for women's studies—years since Pierce's article, we have come full circle on this matter. Now, the fashion is to condemn as sexist any thinker who does not simply and straightforwardly declare that the notion of woman's inferiority to man is just so much nonsense. Swept away in the condemnation are whatever kernels of sympathy and sensitivity for women a thinker exhibits. Any and all deviations by a thinker from the ideal of sexual equality are highlighted and exaggerated. Any mitigating writing, circumstance, context, or history is overlooked.

The excesses of past scholarship on the side of woman's inferiority have been supplanted by the excesses of much present scholarship on the side of woman's equality. Any thinker who is not for the latter may be or must be castigated and, it seems, any sort of criticism will do. If we consider the case of Augustine and present day scholarship, we find the excesses Pierce rightly criticizes, even if some scholars are already combatting these excesses. In at least two places Augustine's work is interpreted incorrectly so that a harsher feminist judgment of Augustine may be rendered.

One area of concern is the issue of the image of God. As I will briefly show, Augustine asserts that 1) the image has nothing to do with the body, and 2) the image is sexless.⁴ The upshot of these two assertions is that man and woman are equally images of God and that sex is only a physical reference. When he explains Ephesians 4:23⁵ and Colossians 3:10⁶ he says that these texts show that “not according to the body, nor according to any part of the soul, but according to the rational mind, where the knowledge of God is able to be, is a person made to the image of the one who created the person.”⁷

Augustine also says of the image that “not only truest reason, but also the authority of the Apostle, declares that not according to the form of the body is a person made to the image of God, but according to the rational mind.”⁸ It is well known that the rational mind, according to Augustine, is immaterial. Elsewhere Augustine says that “only according to the spirit may a person be made to the image of God.”⁹ A human being is an image of God only with regard to the immaterial *mens*, according to Augustine. He takes pains to exclude the body from any consideration of the image. The body does not affect the image in Augustinian anthropology. This is certainly consistent both with Augustine’s notion that the lower things can not affect the higher things and with Augustine’s giving preeminence to the soul, practically to the exclusion of the body, in being human.

Furthermore, with regard to the sexes and the image, Augustine thinks sexuality involves only the body. For him a woman is a woman and a man is a man precisely and only in terms of their bodies. Augustine says that some people misunderstand Genesis because “they do not realize that there could have been no distinction of male and female unless in relation to the body.”¹⁰ He adds that “a woman, for all her physical qualities as a woman, is actually renewed in the spirit of her mind in the knowledge of God, according to the image of her creator, and in this, there is no male or female.”¹¹ Augustine tells us that “according to that by which a woman was a human being, she also had a rational mind, according to which she was made to the image of God.”¹² Agaësse and Solignac comment on this passage that Augustine reaffirms “that the woman, endowed with the *mens* as fully as the man, is equally under that aspect created to the image of God.”¹³ Or, we can conclude the matter of equal spirituality of man and woman in Augustine’s words: “in their minds, a common nature is recognized.”¹⁴ For Augustine, man and woman are equally and similarly an image of God; they are human beings; they are spiritually equal. However, this thought and the passages above do not find their way into much of the literature on Augustine’s view of woman.

Augustine does not even begin to belong in a book entitled *Not in God’s Image: Woman in History from the Greeks to the Victorians*,¹⁵ as McGowan¹⁶ and Horowitz¹⁷ suggest. Ruether refers to the image as androcentric in Augustine,¹⁸ without recognizing the many passages in Augustine’s writing that state the image is sexless. Tvard says that “as souls, both man and woman are equally the image of God. As bodies, however, only the man is made in the image. For only he expresses in his body the power and the superiority of God, the female body expressing, on the contrary passivity and inferiority.”¹⁹ Farley reiterates this thought, explaining that Augustine thinks women are “not fully in the image of God by reason of their bodies.”²⁰ But we just saw Augustine deny that according to the body can a person be an image of God

and we saw him assert that "only according to the spirit may a person be made to the image of God."²¹ Any talk of spiritual inequality, to say nothing of spiritual difference, is alien to Augustine's writing. Modern scholars who assert that a spiritual inequality between man and woman can be found in Augustine overstate his misogyny. Further, they slight Augustine by not even mentioning in their work the conflicting Augustinian statements. These scholars project their own judgment of misogynous thinking onto Augustine.

I am not suggesting that Augustine views man and woman as equal or that he prescribed androgyny for the fourth century. He quite clearly believes that with regard to acting rightly and metaphysically, man is the *melior sexus* and woman, the *infirmior sexus*.²² He quite clearly believes that woman is subject to male authority,²³ though even in this, he may see only difference and perhaps not inequality, whatever that might mean to the modern reader. In any case, to understand Augustine's notion of woman as *infirmior*, we must understand that notion in the context of Augustine's anthropology. That anthropology treats being human as a matter of the rational soul using a body, the latter of which is male or female. Augustine overwhelmingly gives pride of place in being human to the soul, and allows a great distance between the soul and body, with the attendant problems such a distance involves. Insofar as being human involves being a soul with an end in God, a woman can and must perform as a man performs and thus does Augustine present a glowing portrait of his mother at Ostia.²⁴ The distinction of sex and inferiority of woman becomes apparent in Augustine's thought only because being human involves a necessary, though far less important, engagement in matters relating to the body.

However, for Augustine, every human being is an *imago Dei* and must strive for a union with his or her creator; even if we must deal with temporal matters and bodily matters, we must strive to contemplate the eternal. Once we know Augustine's anthropology, with its teleology and prescription for good order, can we understand what he means when he explicates *The Sermon on the Mount*. And not only must Augustine's anthropology be kept in mind, we must bear in mind that he himself is offering an interpretation of the words of Christ. These two caveats seem to be overlooked by some modern writers when they treat Augustine's *De sermone Domini in monte* I, 15, 41. There, Augustine advises us "to love in a woman what is human, hate in her what is of a wife."²⁵

Augustine here advises us to place the love for the eternal and Christ over and against the love of the temporal and temporal relations, such as a wife. Augustine uses the word *uxor*, not the word *femina*. He is not counseling us to hate woman, and any treatment of this passage that suggests as much brutalizes Augustine's writing. To cite this passage as evidence for Augustine's condemnation of woman is unfair as well as unfounded. Yet, that is the gist of Ruether, Tavard, and Clarke and Richardson on this passage. Ruether tells us that Augustine advises us to love woman, "but in a way that totally despises her in all her bodily functions as a woman and identifies all depraved psychic characteristics with femininity."²⁶ Ruether translates *uxor* correctly but attaches *uxor* to woman, not to temporal relations. Tavard translates *uxor* as "feminine," so the passage reads as though Augustine tells us the good Christian "loathes what is feminine."²⁷ Clarke and Richardson also treat *uxor* as "woman," not "wife."²⁸

However, Augustine uses *uxor*, *mater*, or *pater*, or *frater*, or *soror*, or *fili*, as well; so maybe there is some special significance in Augustine's use of *uxor*. The significance comes to this: of all temporal relations, the one that is hardest for a man to put aside for the eternal is this relation with his wife. Augustine is commenting, after all, on Luke 14:26: "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." To treat *uxor* as meaning anything but temporal relationships and not to recognize the significance of choosing *uxor* suggests insensitivity to both Augustine and the Latin language. Such treatment is, on the other hand, consistent with a harsher, even if excessive, judgment of Augustine from a feminist point of view. If I may paraphrase Pierce, much Augustinian scholarship on this passage and on his treatment of *imago Dei* is a set of variations on the theme of Augustine's sexist view that woman is inferior and the consequent necessity of recognizing that sexists do not deserve fairness.

As I remarked earlier, there are some who would combat the excesses of feminist criticism. O'Meara says that Augustine should not be blamed for holding views that were common to all of his day and age.²⁹ Weaver and LaPorte cite factors such as the influences of Augustine's society, intellectual tradition, and Augustine's own attitude toward sexuality to defend him against charges of misogyny.³⁰ These defenses, however, focus on the ideological judgments concerned with Augustine's view of woman, not on the merit of the scholarship concerned with Augustine's view of woman. McGowan and Horowitz³¹ have the matter right, to my mind, when they focus on the latter, for Augustine was not as anti-woman, even by today's feminist standards, as others have made him out to be.

My concern is not only with Augustinian scholarship—would that it were. Then we could conclude that Augustine's writing is difficult to interpret and not even begin to think that much feminist scholarship exhibits systematic and pervasive excess. In passing, I will remark upon Thomistic scholarship. McLaughlin writes that Thomas thinks "the female, although possessing a rational soul, was created solely with respect to her sexuality, her body, as an aid in reproduction for the preservation of the species."³² However, Thomas explicitly says that "man and woman live together not only for the sake of procreation of children, but also for those things necessary to human life."³³ This passage does not sound to me as though Thomas advocates only the role of procreation to be woman's lot; woman was created for more than that. I could also introduce Thomas's view that woman has the same supernatural end that man has, so is created with that in mind, but I believe I have made my point.

We have come a long way in women's studies. We have stopped some of the abuses of androcentric and misogynous scholarship, but we have also created a gynocentric and misandryst scholarship. Neither abuse is acceptable. We need not exaggerate how wrong positions of past thinkers were and are in order for those positions to be assailed. Yes, Augustine thought of woman as inferior to man, but not in the way or ways many feminists would have us believe. We feminists need not exaggerate Augustine's faulty reasoning in order to reject it. Some of his views are bad enough without exaggeration. Let those views fall on their own; they do not need our help.

Saint Joseph's College
Rensselaer, Indiana

McGowan: Misogyny in Augustine and Sexist Scholarship

- ¹ Christine Pierce, "Equality: *Republic V*," *The Monist* (Jan. 1973): 1-11
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ⁴ For a fuller treatment, see Richard J. McGowan, "Augustine's Spiritual Equality: The Allegory of Man and Woman With Regard to *Imago Dei*," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes*, 33 (1987): 255-64.
- ⁵ Ephesians 4:23: "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind."
- ⁶ Colossians 3:10: "You have put on the new nature which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator."
- ⁷ *De Trinitate* XII, 7, 12; PL 42, 1004-5. "...non secundum corpus, neque secundum quamlibet animi partem, sed secundum rationalem mentem, ubi potest esse agnitio Dei, hominem factum ad imaginem ejus qui creavit eum." (All translations are mine.)
- ⁸ *Ibid.*; PL 42, 1004. "Sicut enim non solum veracissima ratio, sed etiam ipsius Apostoli declaret auctoritas, non secundum formam corporis homo factus est ad imaginem Dei, sed secundum rationalem mentem."
- ⁹ *De Genesi ad litteram* III, 22, 34; PL 34, 294. "...secundum solum spiritum fieret ad imaginem Dei."
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*; PL 34, 293. "Nec attendunt masculum et feminam nonnisi secundum corpus fieri potuisse."
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*; PL 34, 293-94. "...tamen et femina quae est corpore femina, renovatur etiam ipsa in spiritu mentis suae in agnitione Dei secundum imaginem ejus qui creavit, ubi non est masculus et femina." See also *De Trin.* XII, 7, 12; PL 42, 1005.
- ¹² *Ibid.*; PL 34, 293. "...secundum id quod et femina homo erat, habebat utique mentem suam eandemque rationalem, secundum quam ipsa quoque facta est ad imaginem Dei."
- ¹³ *La Genèse au Sens Litteral. Bibliothèque Augustinienne*, vol. 48, notes, trans., and intro. P. Agaësse and A. Solignac (Desclee De Brouwer, 1972), p. 627. "...la femme douée de la *mens* tout comme l'homme est également sous cet aspect créée a l'image de Dieu."
- ¹⁴ *De Trin.* XII, 8, 13; PL 42, 1005. "Ergo, in eorum mentibus communis natura cognascitur."
- ¹⁵ Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines, ed. *Not in God's Image: Woman in History from the Greeks to the Victorians* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1978).
- ¹⁶ McGowan, "Equality"
- ¹⁷ Maryanne Cline Horowitz, "The Image of God in Man: Is Woman Included (Gen. 1:27)?," *Harvard Theological Review* (July-Oct. 1979): 175-206.
- ¹⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in *Religion and Sexism*, ed. Ruether (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1974): 150-183, p. 156.
- ¹⁹ George H. Tavard, *Women in Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame, Ind.: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1973), p. 115.
- ²⁰ Margaret A. Farley, "Sources for Inequality in the History of Christian Thought," *Journal of Religion* (April, 1976): 162-176, p. 168.
- ²¹ See nn. 6 and 8 above.
- ²² See *De conjugis adulterenis* II, 20, 21.

- ²³ See *Confessiones* III, 32, 47 and *De Gen. II*, 37, 50.
- ²⁴ *Conf.* IX, 10. Ruether overlooks this portrait.
- ²⁵ *De sermone Domini in monte I*, 15, 41; PL 34, 1250. "...diligere in ea quod homo est, odisse quod uxor est."
- ²⁶ Ruether, op. cit., p. 161.
- ²⁷ Tavard, op. cit., p. 115. At least Tavard supplies the Latin.
- ²⁸ Elizabeth A. Clark and Herbert Richardson. *Women and Religion* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 71, n. 15. To her credit, Clark translates the passage correctly and understands it differently in her *Women in the Early Church* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983), p. 65.
- ²⁹ John J. O'Meara. *The Creation of Man in St. Augustine's De Genesi ad Litteram* (Villanova U. Press, 1980), pp. 30-9.
- ³⁰ F. Ellen Weaver and Jean Laporte, "Augustine and Women: Relationships and Teachings," *Augustinian Studies* 12 (1981): 115-132.
- ³¹ See nn. 16 and 17.
- ³² Eleanor Commo McLaughlin, "Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes: Woman in Medieval Theology," in Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism*, op. cit., pp. 213-266, p. 217.
- ³³ *Ethicorum ad Nicomachum VIII*, *lectio* 12; *Parma Opera Omnia*, vol. 21, p. 290. "...mas et femina communicant non solum causa procreationis filiorum, sed etiam propter ea quae sunt necessaria ad humanam vitam."