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Item Type	Article
Authors	GAO, Yuan
Publisher	Nordic Forum of Sino- Western Studies
Rights	All rights reserved
Download date	2026-09-13 14:17:40
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/169183

Augustine’s Conception of Sexuality and Marriage: A Defense against Alignment of Human Merits on Continence

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Abstract: This paper presents a survey of Augustine’s views on sexuality and marriage, inquiring whether there is an alignment of human merits on the basis of their distance from sexuality. Attending to modern theological discussions, this paper argues that Augustine shifts the issue of lifestyles into the field of moral improvement of passions and stresses the gradual ascent of the renewed passions as a realistic scenario of the aspired perfectionism in the City of God. In this sense, human virtuous lifestyles such as secular conjugal chastity, monastic asceticism and martyrdom are not human merits, but various improving gifts from God.

Key Words: Augustine, sexuality, conjugal chastity, continence, human merits

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1. Discussions on the ranking of human merits on sexuality

Some critics argue that Augustine holds a negative view of concupiscence and, correspondingly, an ascending ranking of the merits of conjugal chastity, widowhood and monastic virginity on the basis of their distance from sexuality, which is rooted in the tradition of asceticism. Some other researchers are of the opinion that Augustine shifted the emphasis from asceticism to moral evaluation according to the grade of humility rather than external factors. I shall address these two competitive views first.

Mathijs Lamberigts remarks that Augustine is firmly in line with the ancient ascetic tradition which taught that the choice of marriage is inferior to abstinence, since marriage involves concupiscentia which for Augustine was a sin after the Fall.^[1] Lamberigts suggests that it would be

[1] Mathijs Lamberigts, “A Critical Evaluation of Critiques of Augustine’s View of Sexuality”, in *Augustine and his Critics*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 186-188.

better to be without sexuality except for the purpose of procreation.^[2] He argues: “It seemed to make more sense to Augustine that a person should make a radical break with sexual desire, rather than make proper use of it within marriage... Sexual desire was something to be avoided at all costs, rather than exploited, however legitimately.”^[3] Sexual desire, he continues, is evil (*malum*) since it does not devote to God but to human’s own will; thus, any sexuality if not for the sake of procreation (e. g., sexuality outside marriage, sexuality with one’s spouse for lust, any indulging in sexual pleasure) was rejected by Augustine.^[4] Only procreation is a permitted case for sexuality, for which “the filth of marriage” could be forgiven.^[5] Lamberigts concludes that Augustine provides a grading on sexuality and marriage, giving the highest regard for the abstinent life and reluctantly accepting sexuality in conjugal relations.^[6]

Patrick Walsh echoes that for Augustine, the merit of abstinence ranks above the conjugal life and the married people will attain a lesser reward than consecrated virgins in heaven.^[7] Walsh argues that various factors influenced Augustine’s alignment of different living modes: (1) Early Christian asceticism influenced him through some predecessors such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and Ambrose. Augustine frequently follows their ascetic ideal and virgin worship in his treatises (i. e., Tertullian’s rigorous asceticism; Cyprian’s notion of virgin’s greater honour in heaven; Ambrose’s vision of Mary as a perfect virgin, etc.)^[8]. (2) Paul’s counsel to the married and unmarried left its mark on Augustine’s views. Especially in 1 Cor. 7:3ff and 1 Cor. 7:25ff, Paul prefers celibacy to marriage, which serves as the scriptural basis for Augustine’s argument in *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta uirginitate*.^[9] (3) Manichaean condemnation of marriage leads the converted Augustine to develop a theological interpretation of sexuality in marriage which refutes the Manichaean way of asceticism. A series of works against Manichaeism show Augustine’s re-evaluations on the (good) meaning of marriage as well as its connections to renunciation. (4) The biased positions between Jovinian and Jerome prompted Augustine to develop a comprehensive theological stance to respond their controversy. A positive evaluation of marriage (Jovinian) and the superiority of virginity (Jerome) contributed to Augustine’s ladder of goodness—virginity above marriage.^[10] Based on these factors, Walsh believes that “marriage was a good, but consecrated virginity was better.”^[11]

As distinct from Lamberigts and Walsh, George Lawless focuses on morality rather than virginity, arguing that Augustine shifts the emphasis from marriage and virginity to humility.^[12] In discussing different ascetic lifestyles and the cult of perfectionism during the fourth and fifth century, Lawless notes that there is a *decentring* tendency away from asceticism in Augustine. He

[2] *Ibid.*, 187.

[3] *Ibid.*, 186.

[4] *Ibid.*, 186-187.

[5] *Ibid.*, 187.

[6] *Ibid.*, 187-188.

[7] Patrick G. Walsh, *Augustine: De bono coniugali; De sancta uirginitate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), xxvi.

[8] *Ibid.*, xvi-xvii.

[9] *Ibid.*, xv-xvi.

[10] *Ibid.*, xx.

[11] *Ibid.*, xxx.

[12] George Lawless, “Augustine’s Decentring of Asceticism”, in *Augustine and his Critics*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 154.

explains that, on the one hand, Augustine does not accept any austere ascetic strategies of his time nor force such rigorous practices to anyone.^[13] Perfectionism and elitism were avoided in his approach against Manichaeism, Pelagianism and Donatism.^[14] On the other hand, when Augustine cites the Pauline source for the view that virginity is superior to marriage in 1 Cor. 7 (e. g., *bene facit/melius facit*), Augustine also states that, “marriage with humility is better (*melius*) than virginity with pride.”^[15] He provides a hierarchical alignment of marriage, widowhood, virginity and martyrdom based on the scale of humility, all these lifestyles being gifts of God.^[16] As Augustine’s parable (*Serm.* 304. 3) shows, “a single garden in which were found not only the roses of the martyrs but also the lilies of the virgins, the ivy of married couples and the violets of widows.”^[17] On this basis, Lawless does not believe that there is any order of outward merits in these lifestyles, but what Augustine displayed is rather a moral scale as various gifts of God.

2. Augustine on the “merits” of sexuality and marriage

Two treatises are important in the above context, *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta uirginitate*, but late works such as *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* and *Contra Iulianum* are also relevant. Commentators rightly notice that various traditions of asceticism and different stages of controversies contributed to Augustine’s view of sexuality and continence, but there are different understandings on Augustine’s concept of “merits” and thus divergences on the issue of whether the conjugal, widows, and virgins have different levels of “merits”. One controversial question is Augustine’s percentage analogy in *De sancta uirginitate* 46, where he asks whether the virginal life is in fruit a hundredfold, the widow’s life sixtyfold and that of the married thirtyfold.^[18]

Augustine seemsto offer a contradictory picture: on the one hand, abstention from sexuality is better than intercourse in marriage and will gain greater merits and gifts; hence the fruit of consecrated virginity is greater than that of marriage.^[19] On the other hand, such alignment of merits does not exist since sometimes one person has fewer merits but would get more rewards from God.^[20] The relation between merits and rewards is more stressed by Augustine in his late works in which the issue of grace and renewal are highlighted. For instance, in *Retractationes* and *De nuptiis et*

[13] *Ibid.*, 144-145.

[14] *Ibid.*, 152.

[15] *Ibid.*, 154.

[16] *Ibid.*, 155.

[17] *Ibid.*, 157.

[18] *s. uirg.* 46: “Whether the virgin’s life represents fruit a hundredfold, the widow’s life sixtyfold, and married life thirtyfold. Or alternatively, whether fruitfulness a hundredfold is to be assigned rather to martyrdom, the sixtyfold to continence, and the thirtyfold to marriage... Or what seems to me more likely, since the gifts of divine grace are many, and one is greater and better than another (hence those words of the Apostle, ‘Strive for the greater gifts’)... In the first place, we must not assess a widow’s continence as bearing no fruit, or relegate it to the merits of married chastity, or equate it with the glory of the virgin...”

[19] *b. coniug.* 6: *Ac per hoc melior est quidem ab omni concubitu continentia quam uel ipse matrimonialis concubitus, qui fit causa gignendi. Sed quia illa continentia meriti amplioris est.*

[20] *s. uirg.* 46: *et aliquando alter fructuosus est donis paucioribus sed potioribus, alter inferioribus sed pluribus.*

concupiscentia, Augustine stresses that there is no true virginity or chastity except that in true faith.^[21] Grace, free will, baptism, and renewal are involved here more strongly than in his early debate of comparing qualities of chastity and virginity. Especially in the debate with Julian(418—430), a more accurate theological anthropology is developed, involving most subjects of his previous controversies. Let us turn to Augustine's anti-Julian treatises *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* and *Contra Iulianum* to evaluate his concept of “merit” and percentage ranking of marriage and virginity.

In his *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, Augustine makes a comparison between Christian and non-Christian behaviour toward concupiscence. He argues that grace will help the baptized to cultivate good habits of resisting disobedient sexual desires. These are virtues of passions.^[22] The regenerated mind will not easily yield to the evil suggestions. The struggle between the flesh and spirit will be regularly exercised in one's mind where the will influenced by grace shows its ability to resist the suggestions of evil desires. Sexual passions are thus gradually diminishing whereas the love(poured by grace) is increasing. Because of the Fall, evil movements of concupiscence take place in all humans, but the renewed Christians will not commit a sin if they do not follow the suggestion—in this case, concupiscence is not counted as a personal sin.^[23] After a long training, good habits of using passions will be developed in married Christian couples and virtues of mind as the corresponding fruits will be cultivated. On the contrary, lust will take an upper hand in those who refuse grace and pursue sexual pleasures(not for procreation). Lusts will induce them to indulge in prurient activities such as adultery and fornication and then make them slaves of evil passions. Obscenity thus occupies their mind and acts as a king.^[24]

Augustine deals with the examples of a harlot, a conjugal partner, a widow, and a virgin in *Contra Iulianum* 6. 55 in order to demonstrate that the more one yields to concupiscence by habit, the greater efforts will be required to convert the evil passions into good use. The sexual inclination of a harlot leads to indulge in lusts more easily than that of a consecrated virgin who has no sexual experience. Similarly, lascivious sexual habits in marriage also break the conjugal chastity and lead to prurient indulgences. Augustine thus stresses that the habituation to the evil of concupiscence will bring people to a bad moral state and separate them from the Kingdom of God.^[25] Therefore, the great evil power of the habitual concupiscence should be conquered by the attractive sweetness of the goodness which is God's grace.^[26] Through training in continence, chastity, virginity, and martyrdom as various living habits and virtues of passions will be developed.

[21] *nupt. et conc.* 1. 5: “There is, then, no true chastity, whether conjugal, or vidual, or virginal, except that which devotes itself to true faith. For though consecrated virginity is rightly preferred to marriage, yet what Christian in his sober mind would not prefer Catholic Christian women who have been even more than once married, to not only vestals, but also to heretical virgins?”

[22] *nupt. et conc.* 1. 25.

[23] *nupt. et conc.* 1. 25.

[24] *nupt. et conc.* 1. 13.

[25] *c. Iul.* 6. 55: *Ex isto et cum isto hominis malo nascitur homo: quod malum per se ipsum tam magnum est, et ad hominis damnationem atque a regno dei separationem tantum habet obligationis.*

[26] *Ep.* 118(8). 3: *Laudabilis est ista concupiscentia, non damnabilis. Non de hac dictum est: Non concupisces, sed de illa qua caro concupiscit aduersus spiritum. De hac autem bona concupiscentia qua concupiscit spiritus aduersus carnem.* On the discussion of Augustine's *bona concupiscentia*.

In these texts, we have seen that Augustine shifts the discussion of concupiscence and continence into the context of renewal and grace, stressing the role of faith and baptism in the therapy. Against the sinlessness doctrine of Julian and the Pelagians, Augustine refers to *concupiscentia*, the innate evil affection in the corrupted humanity as the law of sin.^[27] Augustine distinguishes between three phases of renewal: First, grace has the complete authority in the preparation of salvation without any human initiative. Only grace is able to heal the corrupted nature and the depraved human will (disobedient free will). It pours love into human heart, bringing about the conversion and faith. At the second phase, the human will cooperates with grace in opposing concupiscence in an interior struggle between the flesh and the spirit. In the long run, it will produce various good moral qualities and virtues of passions such as conjugal chastity and virginity as the fruits of the third phase.

This sheds light on the percentage analogy in *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta uirginitate*. In comparing the merit of married chastity with that of widow and virgin, Augustine attributes the various degrees of the fruits to God's love of grace distributed in different grades; likewise, the future different rewards in the Kingdom of God will still be free gifts, not given according to human merits. In fact, there are no true virginity and chastity in this life, Augustine maintains, but it does not mean that the fruits of these modes of life can be equalized. He clarifies this at the end of *De natura et gratia*:

Inchoate love, therefore, is inchoate holiness; advanced love is advanced holiness; great love is great holiness; “perfect love is perfect holiness,”—but this “love”... which in this life is then the greatest, when life itself is contemned in comparison with it.^[28]

The true love “by the Holy Spirit who is given to us” pours into this life cultivating it in various grades which form an increasing process of incipient, advanced, and great love. Conjugal chastity, virginity, and martyrdom are thus virtues of controlling passions in a good way. In this sense, we can see that the proportion of “merit” constitutes the ladder of love that the perfect grace bestows to those who cultivate their good moral habits and the spiritual renewal with respect to passions.

3. Conclusion

It is thus clear that the conception of the inner moral improvement of passions led by grace shows Augustine's attitudes toward ways of various living styles with respect to sexuality, which is rooted in the theological renewal tradition rather than in a program of exterior asceticism. Lamberigts and Walsh rightly note that Augustine echoes the Pauline alignment of marriage and virginity on the basis of the distance from *concupiscentia*, but they draw the misleading conclusion that Augustine follows the tradition of asceticism in ranking the merit of virgins above that of the

[27] c. *Iul.* 6, 53. “Concupiscence does not remain in the manner of a substance, a kind of body or spirit; it is an affection, an evil quality, like sickness.” Cf. *nupt. et conc.* 1, 28.

[28] *nat. et gr.* 84; *Caritas ergo inchoata inchoata iustitia est; caritas prouecta prouecta iustitia est; caritas magna magna iustitia est; caritas perfecta perfecta iustitia est, sed caritas... quae tunc maxima est in hac uita, quando pro illa ipsa contemnitur uita.*

married. This grading according to outward human merits is refused by Lawless who argues that Augustine distances himself from asceticism, but Lawless does not sufficiently attend to these being cultivated habits and various virtues of renewed passions which show a moral ascent of love led by grace. To summarise, Augustine's vision of virtuous lifestyles such as secular conjugal chastity, monastic asceticism and martyrdom are not human merits, but various gifts from God, in improving the inner morality of passions toward the final consummation in the promised City of God.

中文题目：

奥古斯丁性与婚姻观：驳禁欲功德的排序

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提要：本文探讨奥古斯丁的性与婚姻观，重点考察人可否通过禁欲来获得不同修行功德的问题。通过分析当代奥古斯丁学对这个问题的争论，本文认为奥古斯丁把谈论不同禁欲生活方式的问题切换到对情欲内在道德提升的维度，而提供了一种新的排序：在圣灵恩典的帮助下人展现了情欲的内在更新和爱的不断升华，直至最终抵达上帝之城中的精神境界的完满。在这个意义上看，人类在此生不同的禁欲或生活方式如婚姻的忠贞、修道院的禁欲、甚至是殉道，都不是人自身修来的功德，而是上帝恩赐的不同礼物，来不断地塑造和提升情的生命的境界。

关键词：奥古斯丁，性，婚姻的忠贞，禁欲，人的功德