

## The Christian Panic

It is common to blame the real demonization of lust on Saint Augustine. It is always convenient to have a villain we can name, and Augustine's lurid views of lust and sin undoubtedly saturated the subsequent Western tradition. There is also a handy explanation of why Augustine should have been hung up about sex. Augustine was born in North Africa around A.D. 354, the product of a half-pagan world, and only converted to Christianity when he was 29. Shortly afterward he repudiated the woman with whom he had lived since his teens and by whom he had a son. His ambitious Christian mother, Monica, seems to have been chiefly responsible for sending the woman and son back to Africa while Augustine pursued a career in the church in Milan.

It is not very nice to have an ambitious mother, and to dump a partner and son because of the mother's nagging. So, in this story, pangs of conscience then overcame Augustine to such an extent that he had to displace his guilt onto the evil pleasures deriving from the sexual act itself. Walking in a garden in Milan, he found Paul's Epistle to the Romans: "Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying . . . make not provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof" (13:13–14). Impressed by the relevance of this, the story goes, he developed a phobia of his previous chambering and wantonness, and to justify that invented a monstrous theology based on the concept of original sin and its transmission from Adam down through the whole of humanity, all corrupted by the sinfulness of lust. And just as sin trickles down through all of us from Adam's Fall, so in the Western world Augustine's hatred of sexuality trickled down through the Christian church to infect all subsequent thought and feeling on the subject.

It is a simple story, and some of it is true. But as an explanation of anything it is sadly lacking. Augustine might certainly have felt guilty about his treatment of his partner and his son. But when we describe him as displacing this guilt, we use the vocabulary too easily. Displacement indeed has a role in human affairs: if I am angry at you, but for some reason cannot express it, I may vent my

feelings by kicking the cat instead. We all know that it is wise to keep out of the way of people who are angry, whatever they started off being angry about. But if you feel guilty about one thing, such as exiling your partner and child, it is not so easy to "vent" the feeling by feeling guilty about something else instead. Is it even possible? And what would be the function of this displacement—why should it help? If I displace my original guilt by feeling guilty about something else, such as having lustful thoughts, or for that matter having forgotten to water the flowers, why does that make me better off? I am still feeling guilty.

Be that as it may, if Augustine was displaying some unconscious strategy of "displacing" his guilt, why should sexuality offer itself as something to feel guilty about? And why should his private psychological problems have caught an audience—in other words, why was the culture ready to receive the message? In any case, the story ignores the fact that by his own account Augustine was well onto a sexual guilt trip before he dumped his partner:

As a youth I had been woefully at fault, particularly in early adolescence. I had prayed to you for chastity and said, "Give me chastity and continence, but not yet."<sup>27</sup>

The legend also neglects the fact that he came at the intersection of at least three much older traditions of mistrust, some more

radical than his. The classical, Graeco-Roman grounding we have already met, and Augustine thoroughly imbibed it:

Are the pleasures of the body to be sought, which Plato describes, in all seriousness, as “snares, and the source of all ills”? . . . The promptings of sensuality are the most strong of all, and so the most hostile to philosophy. . . . What man in the grip of this, the strongest of emotions, can bend his mind to thought, regain his reason, or, indeed, concentrate on anything . . . ?<sup>28</sup>

The second influence on Augustine was the sect of Manichaeism. The Manichee illumination is that the world was the battleground of two implacably opposed forces, light and darkness. Light, which is curiously passive, had been invaded by the raging, lustful forces of darkness. Light was the domain of the soul, darkness that of the body. But the good soul finds itself imprisoned, trapped, and subordinated to the bad body. The religious life consists in trying to help it to get free, by the usual religious blend of contemplation and asceticism. Augustine later spent a lot of energy attacking the Manichees and their curious graft of Christianity onto the Persian religion of Zoroaster, but for nine years he belonged to the sect. And even more surely than in the Stoics, the place of lust in Manichaeism is darkness and the pit. Lust is the center of our embodiment, the bondage of the soul to the forces of darkness.

The third and most potent influence was the immediate Christian atmosphere. Saint Paul had said that it was better to marry than burn, but marriage was clearly a second-best to keeping apart from the whole problem, neither marrying nor burning. Only a very short time later, ascetic Christian cults were preaching chastity. This, the renunciation of sex, was a powerful outward sign of the changed order of things brought about by the coming of Christ, an order in which a new spiritual salvation was offered. Procreation was unnecessary, given the imminent second coming and transformation of the world. By the second century, the Encratites (after the Greek *enkrateia*, continence, in the sense both of self-control and of abstention from something) held that the goal of the Christian life was indeed an internal unity with the spirit of Christ, and this was a unity that blocked the ordinary unity of marriage, “the most clear symptom of Adam’s frailty and the most decisive obstacle to the indwelling of the spirit.”<sup>29</sup> Baptism in such sects was the signal of sexual renunciation, the triumph over our animal natures, and a clearing of the decks for a yet more delicious unity with the Holy Spirit. In some sects, especially holy men ritually castrated themselves.

So by the time of Augustine, the cult of virginity was in full swing. For well over a century, many had held that the only fitting life for a Christian was monkish seclusion in the desert. And not surprisingly, if you seclude yourself in the desert lust becomes

something of a preoccupation. Saint Anthony, the father of desert monasticism, had to wrestle with beasts and demons, and Saint Jerome tells us what it was like:

There was I, therefore, who from fear of hell had condemned myself to such a prison, with only scorpions and wild beasts as companions. Yet I was often surrounded by dancing girls. My face was pale from fasting, and my mind was hot with desire in a body as cold as ice. Though my flesh, before its tenant, was already as good as dead, the fires of the passions kept boiling within me.

And so, destitute of all help, I used to lie at Jesus' feet. I bathed them with my tears, I wiped them with my hair. When my flesh rebelled, I subdued it by weeks of fasting.<sup>30</sup>

This in the context of telling a young virgin, Eustochium, how to avoid the "drawbacks of marriage, such as pregnancy, the crying of infants, the torture caused by a rival, the cares of household management, and all those fancied blessings which death at last cuts short." According to Jerome, virginity needs the closest guarding, but even so, by itself it is not enough. There are bad virgins. "'Whosoever looketh on a woman,' the Lord says, 'to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.' So that virginity may be lost even by a thought. Such are evil virgins,

virgins in the flesh, not in the spirit; foolish virgins . . ." Paradise is only full of virgins who have not the faintest desire not to be virgins.

Here we have a quite new note, well beyond a Greek caution about the space that desire can occupy and the corresponding need for control. We have hatred, corruption, sin. For the Stoics, an "agitation" may well up in us, but in itself it is neither good nor bad, but guilt-free and neutral. Any agitation is capable of being neutralized by further reflection, and it is the efficacy of this antidote that occupies the moralist. For the Stoic adept, the jolt that comes from seeing a desirable partner, just like the jolt that comes from seeing a bear on the path, is not yet a desire or an emotion. By itself it is of no predictive value, for it is there to be controlled and can be controlled. But for Christians, the first jolt or movement or agitation has become the hiss of the serpent, temptation. And even to hear the hiss of the serpent sullies you.

We have gone beyond the ordered city with the governor, reason, harmoniously commanding the lower desires. We have the need to exterminate and annihilate the lower orders altogether. We need not to govern them, but to use insecticide on them. Even if we manage not to succumb to temptation, to live without an expense of spirit, we live in a waste of shame.

It is sometimes said that Christianity represented a backward step from the healthier attitudes of the Judaism from which it

emerged. That may be true in some respects; indeed, it was part of Christianity's complaint against Judaism, vigorously voiced by Jerome and others. However, Judaism also gave us the temptress Eve, and it generally associates sexuality with uncleanness or pollution. And to the Christians, virginity kept you from many things, but above all pollution. Thus a contemporary pope, Siricius, held that Mary could not have given Jesus a brother or sister, even ones younger than him, because

Jesus would not have chosen to be born of a virgin had he been compelled to regard her as so incontinent that the womb in which the body of the Lord took shape, that hall of the Everlasting King, would be defiled by the presence of male seed.<sup>31</sup>

In this magical thinking, not just past pollution but the prospect of future stain, even after you had left, would be quite enough to put you off, like being suspicious of a public lavatory not because of who might have been there, but because of who might follow you there.

In short, the association of lust with uncleanness and disgust, as well as with the wiles of the devil, darkness, the animal, the body, and eventually death, damnation, and hell, was firmly in place. Augustine needed only to breathe it in.

Indeed, in this overheated culture, Augustine was something of a moderate. His rigorous philosophical mind zeroed in on the situation before the Fall. In Paradise, things were as God intended, so how did he intend them? The crucial question is: "Was there sex in the garden of Eden?" At various times Augustine came to different conclusions. He really preferred the idea that in Paradise children might have been begotten by purely spiritual love, "uncorrupted by lust" and without the sexual act. Sexual difference would not have been visible. This is not a particularly moderate solution—it was that of the Encratites and of Anthony and Jerome. But Augustine reluctantly came to the conclusion that sexual difference must have entered in, because otherwise Eve would have been no use to Adam, whereas the Bible tells us that she was. Augustine's line of thought is a little embarrassing to us here, since it appears to be roughly that since there was no housework to be done in Paradise, it is difficult to imagine what other use Eve could have been to Adam. It must have been some kind of—gulp—intimacy. In any case, he relents a little, and ascribes to Adam and Eve sexual bodies designed for procreation, although in this interim view, he held that these bodies would not in fact have been used before the Fall. God would, however, have designed their bodies for procreation somewhat reluctantly, perhaps only because he foresaw that Eve would take the apple, and then, rather literally, all hell would break loose.

But the real glory of Augustine's sexual theology comes next, in the doctrine that *if* they had used their bodies before the Fall, everything would in any case have been all right. Adam and Eve would have felt neither lust nor pleasure. In Paradise, people could control their sexual organs as they do their other limbs. "Without the lascivious promptings of lust, with perfect serenity of soul and body, the husband would have seminated into his wife's womb."<sup>32</sup>

Copulation would have been just like shaking hands. Augustine knows this is hard to envisage, but in a delightful passage he helps us to do it:

We do in fact find among human beings some individuals with natural abilities very different from the rest of mankind and remarkable by their very rarity. Such people can do some things with their body which are for others utterly impossible and well-nigh incredible when they are reported. Some people can even move their ears, either one at a time or both together. Others without moving the head can bring the whole scalp—all the part covered with hair—down towards the forehead and bring it back again at will. Some can swallow an incredible number of articles and then with a slight contraction of the diaphragm, can produce, as if out of a bag, any article they please, in perfect condition. There are others who imitate the cries of birds and

beasts and the voices of any other men, reproducing them so accurately as to be quite indistinguishable from the originals, unless they are seen. A number of people produce at will such musical sounds from their behind (without any stink) that they seem to be singing from that region.<sup>33</sup>

So the solution becomes that before the Fall, *if* there had been sexual activity then it was subject in every way to the rational will, just as in exceptional people musical farting can be deliberately controlled. Plato's black horse would not even have been in harness. But the charioteer could have done without its tug and somewhat half-heartedly gone at it anyhow.

Warming to this theme, Augustine saw the involuntary, rebellious nature of sexual desire as a symbol or emblem of the whole fallen state of mankind. It was a constant reminder of the original rebellion that led to the expulsion from Paradise. In nightly secretions and emissions, inappropriate lusts, and even the rebellious failures of our members to rise as they should when we want them to, we are reliving Adam and Eve's original crime. The rebellions of the body are constant emblems of humanity's rebellion against the Good. This is the real meaning of the Fall, and of the inheritance of original sin.

The psychological companions of these involuntary stirrings from below are lust and pleasure. It is them, rather than sexual

activity in itself, that have to be avoided. The only possible excuse for sexual activity is procreation, which should be initiated without either lust or pleasure. The intensity of Augustine's rejection is illustrated in his reaction to the Manichaean doctrine that embodied existence, down here on earth, was an evil, so that bringing children into the world was in fact a crime, and you should time intercourse so as to avoid pregnancy. Augustine spits on them:

You desire no children, for whose sake alone marriages are contracted. Why, then, are you not among those who forbid marriage, if you seek to deprive marriage of that which constitutes it? For if that be taken away, husbands become vile lovers, wives whores, marriage beds brothels, and fathers in law procurers.<sup>34</sup>

Eventually we get to a ladder. Virginity is best. After that, matrimony without sex is fine, and next best is matrimony plus pleasureless procreative activity. Procreative activity accompanied by pleasure is pretty regrettable; but worst of all, because it would turn your wife into a whore and your home into a brothel, is to act for the sake of pure sexual pleasure.

It does not seem to have occurred to Augustine that sometimes we require loss of control. We tease people in order to make

them blush involuntarily, and we like it when they are involuntarily aroused by our presence or our desire. A similar point arises in a different connection. Exploring the embodiment of Christ in human form, the question confronts the systematic theologian of whether Christ was ever sad. Augustine said that indeed he was, "but sad by taking up sadness of his own free will, in the same way as he, of his own free will, took up human flesh." The trouble is that this will not quite amount to the real thing. A sadness that is chosen is not the same as the helpless river of grief that sweeps us away. Sometimes we can control our grief, but sometimes we cannot. Neither can we switch it on or off at will, and we would be suspicious that someone who could was not actually feeling the real thing. Similarly, a partner who can decide at will whether to feel desire is not quite the real thing. We don't want control. We want to feel swept away ourselves, and especially we want each other to be swept away, just as we require blushes to be involuntary, and it is no sign of shame that they are.

Even in his own time, Augustine had his critics. The most acute, Julian of Eclanum, thought that the whole argument was hopeless. He cites sleep, which overcomes us just as completely, but about which we do not normally feel shame or guilt. He also takes exception to Augustine's view of what is voluntary and what is not, recognizing that while sexual desire is not under the command of the will, bubbling up sometimes whether we like it

or not, nevertheless we only act on it by the consent of the will. As the Stoics thought, the charioteer can always rein in the black horse.

There is also a lethal objection to Augustine's association of the evils of pleasure with the stigma of involuntariness. There is no intrinsic reason why Adam and Eve should not have been granted sexual *pleasure* in Paradise, even if everything was as much under control as a good handshake. After all, our tongues stay in or stick out when we want them to, and our lips do not purse themselves rebelliously at awkward moments. Thus we control kissing, but we also take pleasure in it. Surely Paradise might have given us sex like that? Perhaps in some recess of his mind Augustine might have thought, correctly, that this could not really be paradisiacal sex, because one of the pleasures of sexual desire is to create an involuntary bodily reaction in the partner, just as one of the pleasures of teasing someone might be to create an involuntary blush. But Augustine spent a good part of his declining years trying to refute Julian, and in the end, politically if not intellectually, he won.

If we think this was a disaster, we have to remember that Julian's sexual theology was not a bed of roses either. He was a follower of the British heretic Pelagius, who denied original sin only to make room for the possibility of striving for perfection by our own unaided efforts. By a life of renunciation and

asceticism we can turn the clock back and regain Adam's original unity with God. Like a good British schoolmaster, Pelagius insisted that we are not at the mercy of forces too strong for our will. Such a doctrine is an excuse for moral torpor. His muscular Christianity offers nothing but struggle. By comparison, being told by Augustine that some things are not under our own control can be quite comforting. Augustine at least gives us some of the consolations of being victims, where the fierce and demanding Pelagius would have us feel criminal. In fact, he thought Augustine was a bit soft on hellfire.