

840:427 Seminar in the Study of Religion
TTh4, DC (2:15-3:35); Loree 131

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Topic for Spring semester 2012: The Ethics of Augustine

Augustine of Hippo, who lived in the late fourth and early fifth centuries of the Christian era, is the most important theologian of the classical era in the Western Christian church. The Western church is sometimes called the “Latin church,” as its main language was Latin, by contrast to the “Greek church” of the eastern part of the Mediterranean world. One reason for Augustine’s prominence in the West is that he wrote in Latin, by contrast to the majority of early Christian theologians, who wrote in Greek. The Western church in Augustine’s time already called itself the “Catholic church,” expressing by the term “catholic”—“universal”—the claim of the papacy, as inheritor of the see of St. Peter, to universal primacy not only in the Western church but within Christianity as a whole. Christians in the Eastern church, by contrast, came to describe themselves as “Orthodox,” meaning that they held to right teaching or doctrine. Augustine consciously wrote as a Catholic, and another reason for his prominence in the West is his allegiance to the Catholic conception of the church. In any case, for Christians in his own time and later, his thought provided a kind of funnel or sieve through which early Christian ideas flowed into later Western Christianity—fundamental ideas about scripture and Christian teaching, ideas from earlier theological thinkers, and other ideas developed by Augustine himself in reflecting on various theological themes, often in intense dialogue with theological and philosophical adversaries. Augustine’s theology and the piety and practices derived from it define early medieval Western Christianity; they provide a base from which the high medieval scholastic theologians (most notably including Thomas Aquinas) worked; and in fundamental respects the Protestant Reformation can be seen as an effort to recover Augustinian conceptions about Christianity that had been lost or obscured in late medieval Catholicism. Augustine’s thought remains central to both of the main branches of western Christianity, Catholic and Protestant. That centrality is the reason for this seminar on Augustine’s theology.

Augustine wrote a number of systematic treatises, but many of his writings are occasional, episodic, and overlapping. The same ideas appear in many contexts, and they are developed (or not!) with reference to those contexts. Often these contexts are polemical, as Augustine battled with enemies including the Manichaeans, the Pelagians, and the Donatists—the first adherents of a rival philosophy, the others proponents of Christian views determined to be heretical. The common threads in Augustine’s thought make it worth examining, while the diversity of development of these threads makes his thought interesting.

This course focuses on Augustine’s thinking as focused on ethics, that is, right conduct in human behavior. We will begin by examining the theological context of his ethical thought, his conception of creation, fall, and redemption, and the two kinds of love, *cupiditas* and *caritas*, that pertain to human life in history; and his three general summary statements on ethics, including a work of fatherly advice to his son. Then we will examine his ethical thinking as applied to two topics, war and sexuality. The seminar will operate as a “great thinkers and ideas” course, working off the writings of Augustine himself and seeking to interpret them through reflection and dialogue, though attention will also be given to secondary sources interpreting Augustine’s

thinking. Close reading of the original texts will be needed, and independent reflection on their meaning is our goal.

A day-by-day listing of the topics and readings we will be discussing is appended.

The original materials we will be reading are available in standard collections of Augustine's works, but buying individual volumes of these collections, even as used books, could be prohibitively expensive. Luckily, most of Augustine's treatises can be read or downloaded from online sites, including the ones we will be reading, and I recommend that you download and print personal copies of the ones we will study. The website I recommend you try out as a source is www.newadvent.org/fathers; scroll down to Augustine and choose the work you are looking for. You can also look at www.virtualreligion.net/vri/index; then follow the links to Augustine's works.

What Augustine wrote on war is an exception to what I say above, because he never wrote a systematic treatise on war, instead treating this subject in brief passages in a variety of different works on various subjects. An excellent compilation of the relevant material is provided in G. Reichberg, H. Syse, and E. Begby (eds.), *The Ethics of War*. I am having this scanned and posted online for your use.

We will also be working through an edited volume of essays on Augustine's ethics from various perspectives, *The Ethics of St. Augustine*, edited by William S. Babcock. I am having this scanned and posted online.

Finally, as to requirements: In a course like this, regular attendance, careful and regular reading of the material to be discussed, and interested participation in the discussions are essential. As to writing, members of the seminar are asked to write two papers of 8-10 pages, one each on some idea or combination of ideas treated up to that point in the course. The first paper will be due on March 1, midway through the semester, the second at the end, in lieu of a final exam.

Day-by-day plan of the course:

January 17: First day of class. No readings. Overview of the course; initial survey of Augustine's life, the shape of his thought, his influence.

Part I: Augustine's ethics in general and its relation to his theology

January 19: Read *The Ethics of St. Augustine* (ESA below), Introduction and Carney chapter.

January 24: Read ESA, Burns chapter

January 26: Read ESA, Babcock chapter on sin

January 31: Read Augustine, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*

February 2: Read Augustine, *Concerning the Teacher*

February 7: Read Augustine, *Concerning the Nature of Good*

February 9: Read Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will*

February 14: Read Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*

February 16: Read ESA, Babcock chapter on *cupiditas* and *caritas*

February 21-23: Read Augustine, *Enchiridion*

February 28: Retrospective: Augustine's conception of ethics in its theological frame.

No new reading; reflect on everything this far.

Part II: Politics and war in Augustine's writings and in his medieval interpreters

March 1: Read ESA, TeSelle chapter. First paper due.

March 6: Read ESA, Langan chapter; Johnson *The Quest for Peace*, 56-66

March 8: Read Reichberg, Syse, and Begby (eds.), *The Ethics of War*, 70-90

March 13-15: Spring break

March 20: Read Reichberg, Syse, and Begby (eds.), *The Ethics of War*, 104-124, 169-182

March 22: Retrospective on Augustine on politics and war. No new reading; reflect on reflect on readings on this topic.

Part III: Augustine on sexuality and marriage

March 27: Read ESA, Ramsey chapter

March 29: Read Augustine, *On Continence*

April 3-5: No classes; JTJ at professional meeting

April 10: Read Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*

April 12: Read Augustine, *On Holy Virginit*

April 17: Read Augustine, *On the Good of Widowhood*

April 19: Read Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence*

April 24: Retrospective on Augustine on sexuality and marriage. No new readings; reflect on readings on this topic.

April 26: Last class day. Retrospective on Augustine's ethics as a whole.

The second paper is due at the beginning of the final exam period scheduled for this course. It should be submitted as an e-mail attachment sent to me at jtj@rci.rutgers.edu in one of the following formats: Word (*.doc or docx) or Rich Text Format (*.rtf).