A Critical Assessment of Augustine’s View of Sexuality and Marriage

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Introduction

Augustine is considered to be the greatest theologian of early Christianity, and, arguably, the greatest Christian theologian of all times beside Paul. His theological point of view on sexuality and marriage has great impact on Christians, Catholics and Protestants alike, even to this day. It is thus essential to provide a fair discourse and assessment on his theology of sexuality.

There are usually two lines of critiques for Augustine’s theology of sexuality and marriage. The first group often claims that Augustine is being impersonal in that marriage becomes a tool for producing offspring instead of mutual enjoyment. The other critiques complain that Augustine’s view of sexuality is overall pessimistic and sin-bound; the sexual desire is like a time bomb for sin and evil actions. While on surface these critiques have some valid points, as we will see below, they often miss taking a careful examination of Augustine’s text and understanding him fully and correctly. It is thus the intent of this paper to respond to these critiques by putting Augustine’s words on sexuality and marriage in the proper context, and at the end provide affirmation for Augustine’s contribution, or potential contribution, to modern theology of sexuality and marriage. I shall first provide the historical context of the theological stance of Augustine, who stood against both the thought of both the Manicheans and the Pelagians.

Historical context of Augustine’s view of sexuality and marriage: Augustine combating the Manicheans and the Pelagians
Perhaps it would be fair to start off with the influence of asceticism on Augustine’s theology of sexuality. Asceticism is the worldview that stringent self-discipline on the body is necessary because the body is a lesser good than the soul or spirit; Indeed, Augustine had been rather intentional to fight off his traces of Manichaeism and Neoplatonism backgrounds after his conversion to Christianity. For instance, Augustine intentionally wrote on the contrast between Manichean sexual ethics and those of Catholic Christians, which was primarily accomplished in two treatises: On the Morals of the Manicheans and On the Morals of the Catholic Church, by pointing out the difference of motivations of sexual restraints – for the Manicheans it was the hatred of the ‘tainted’ body and, to the Christians, it was the love of God.

On the other hand, the influence of Neoplatonism on Augustine was harder to shove off. The Neoplatonists regarded the material world, including the human body as evil.

Whereas Augustine asserted a positive view of nature, in particular, creation and the human body, when it comes to sexuality, Augustine was believed to have cast a negative nuance on it, and received blames for laying an imbalanced view for sex in centuries after him. For example, Lewis Smedes, the renowned contemporary renowned, late theologian on ethics, in his popular book Sex for Christians, describes Augustine’s mingling sex and post-Lapsarian in the following manner: “Augustine could not imagine an innocent person in Paradise turned on sexually: a sinless Adam could never have been sexually aroused by a pure Eve; Adam and Eve could not have walked with God in the day and made spontaneous love at night.”

It is soberly viewed that Augustine’s stance, which lays the foundation of subsequent Roman Catholic Church’s belief, that the legitimacy of sex is in procreation in marriage. Augustine’s emphasis on the procreation purpose in marriage could be attributed to the rejection of the Manichean practice of abstaining sexual relations if contraception measures were used.

In addition to combating Manichean beliefs, Augustine, at his old age stage, found a strong opposition from the Patriarch bishop Julius of Eclanum, on the nature of concupiscence (or concupiscentia, or lust, in English). 1 In his book Sex for Christians, describes Augustine’s mingling sex and post-Lapsarian in the following manner: “Augustine could not imagine an innocent person in Paradise turned on sexually: a sinless Adam could never have been sexually aroused by a pure Eve; Adam and Eve could not have walked with God in the day and made spontaneous love at night.”

Response to Augustine’s critiques:

The Trinity of Matrimonial Goods

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and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife sharing of body, including genital organs, which provides the procreative power. According to Augustine, any withholding ... to the honorable task of begetting children, so that marital intercourse makes something good out of the evil of lust.”

Julian the Pelagian bishop opposed Augustine’s position as he noticed that Augustine often described the human desire as a vitium.

In other words, the mutual fidelity in marriage must entail the selfless control of the sexual organs on the movements of the sexual organs (E. Schmitt, Le Manage Chrétien, 95) than merely as “the passionate, uncontrolled element in sexuality” (G. Bonner, St. Augustine of Hippo [Canterbury Press, 1986], 375).

Conclusion: Contemporary Contribution of Augustine’s View of Sexuality

Bibliography