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**Rhetoric as a Possible Bridge between the Sacred and the Secular**

In this paper I will examine the relationship between the sacred and secular as St. Augustine himself might envision it, based on ideas he expresses in his work *On Christian Teaching*. I say, how he “might envision it,” because, although Augustine talks extensively about differences between the divine and human, the religious and the classical or “pagan,” and the heavenly and the earthly, I am not altogether certain that the term “secular” as we now know it is one he would recognize. Nonetheless, much of what he says about the two separate realms of “signs” and “things can lead, I believe, towards a useful envisioning of the interrelationship between the sacred and the secular in our own society and culture.

*On Christian Teaching’s[[1]](#footnote--1)* fourth and final book considers the use of rhetoric in Christian teaching. I believe that rhetoric for Augustine is a fundamental component—a bridge, if you will—in determining the interaction of the sacred and secular realms. And I also hope to show how rhetoric can be shown as both a microcosm and a verbal merging point of the interrelationship itself.

On the one hand, Augustine’s animus against the non-sacred world is well known. He devotes a great deal of time and space in his *Confessions* to developing his idea of how, in order to convert, one needs to turn away from the world and toward God. And his passages against the popular entertainments and shows of his time and also against the *Aeneid* (particular against the story of Dido and Aeneas) are well known. Yet, at the same time, Augustine’s own education and background are firmly rooted in the classical and/or pagan world that he deplores. And he himself recognizes that without the philosophic school of thought that we now refer to as neo-Platonism, he might never have made the intellectual jump to Christianity. And the book that had the greatest initial impact on his life and that served as a vital point in his intellectual development was not the Bible but rather Cicero’s *Hortensius*, because this was the text that was capable of speaking to him at that time. His own story in the *Confessions* is rooted in a journey narrative that draws deeply from Virgil—and that would not have been able to come into existence without the *Aeneid* and the *Odyssey*. And a recurring motif throughout his writings involves making use of a physical image (in terms of both traveling and turning around) to describe the way one turns back to God. While he may be a master at doing this sort of thing—he is by no means an originator: consider, after all, Christ’s parables in Matthew or his sayings in John. And Augustine says that things pagan (such as music) are not to be shunned if something concerning divine scripture can be gleaned from them (*OCT*, p. 47). This is by no means to suggest that for him all of the non-sacred world is to be embraced; he notes that “thousands of fictional stories and romances” are a part of the (non-sacred) world that should be avoided.

In order to understand the way Augustine relates to these two realms of the non-sacred and the sacred, we first need to familiarize ourselves with his understanding of what he refers to as “things” and how things themselves divide into two separate categories. There are:

**a.** *things* in themselves: these are essentially the divine things such as the Trinity, heaven, etc. These are things that are sought and loved for their own sake.

**b.** things that function as *signs*: these are essentially things here on earth. They are things that are *used*—that is, we do not love them for their own sakes, but we use them for the sake of reaching the divine and heavenly things that we are ultimately seeking to love.

At first it might seem that Augustine might propose a solution of living the divine life and involving ourselves exclusively with the divine things (embracing them and loving them accordingly) and sidestepping, ignoring, and/or deploring the world of signs. However, our earthly, mortal, flawed, and sinful nature does not make that even a remote possibility.

In short, we very much need the world of imperfect, earthly, and non-sacred signs in order to reach the world of things (i.e., the sacred realm)—that is, in order to understand those things and to eventually live with and love them. And we need the world of signs in order to *express*, *describe*, *discuss*, and *explain* the sacred world of things. This latter fact helps explain for Augustine why scriptural language is often so figurative in nature: it needs to make use of figures from our world in order to express divine truths. Consider Song of Solomon 4:2 for example: “Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them is bereaved.” This for Augustine is a primary example of a text that has complex yet ultimately straightforward spiritual meanings, even if on the surface it seems to be a poetic description of the non-sacred world in which we live. He sees these images as signs that can point us to the spiritual truths. (*OCT*, p. 33)

For Augustine, the non-sacred is what we make use of in order to reach and enjoy the sacred. In order to understand and/or express the sacred, we often need to make use of the non-sacred. In this way, the non-sacred functions as a metaphor for the sacred. From a Christian standpoint, as Augustine understands it, all of language and the entire physical world around us is capable of serving as a metaphor for approaching the sacred and the divine. Paul expresses this sort of idea very memorably in 1 Corinthians when he says “it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” (1 Cor. 1:22). In other words, in order for the truth to reach us, it needs to be presented through something that might be a little simplified, a little stupid, or even a touch wrong—but if it helps point someone toward the things that are true, then it has served a vital and necessary purpose.

So what for Augustine distinguishes “good and permissible non-sacred” from “bad and to-be-avoided non-sacred?” It would seem that for him a fundamental question to ask would be “does this particular element of the non-sacred world contribute to ‘the necessities of life’?” If we are using (or are able to use) things in a way that can lead to enjoyment of God and heaven, then according to Augustine we should by all means use them (and even “study and commit them to memory.” And it is crucial for Augustine that the non-sacred element in question not be “self-indulgent” or “superfluous.” (*OCT*, p. 54) He is opposed to “fruitless expenditure of effort” on things and bodies of knowledge that do not lead one to divine truth. He even makes the challenging claim that arts are not to be practiced or even perfected for their own sakes, but rather only inasmuch as they help us to be better aware of “what scripture wishes to convey.” (*OCT*, pp. 57-8)

To put it broadly, the non-sacred world, when used properly for Augustine, can serve as what we might nowadays call “effective signage” for the religious and the divine. For Augustine, the non-sacred can be good when it is useful.

So for Augustine, the non-sacred is permissible (and even good) so long as it functions as a sign for the divine and eternal things. (*OCT*, p. 72) The non-sacred can never be a good in itself—but rather it can only be good inasmuch as it is useful for pointing to or leading one to the divine.

Augustine seems to believe a similar principle at play with regards to rhetoric. As he sees it, rhetoric can be necessary as a useful verbal way of drawing a listener or a reader toward the truth. Augustine does not believe the wordings and phrasings should be merely precious in themselves—but rather the beauty that true rhetoric possesses is a reflection of the heavenly and sacred beauties that the passage is discussing.

Beauty in rhetoric for Augustine is a reflection of the truths being expressed and represented. It is not mere technique that makes for the beauty—but rather the technique is brought about as a result of the profound and beautiful truths being discussed. He gives several examples from the Scriptures, most frequently from Paul’s Epistles—where he shows how St. Paul’s rhetoric can match anyone in terms of skill. But for Augustine it is important that St. Paul was not trying to be rhetorical when he wrote this way—but rather that the rhetoric is a natural and fluid form of expression for the types of truth and beauty being discussed.

Rhetoric may well be the extension and expression of the overlayering and intersecting of the secular and the divine. Rhetoric, after all, is figurative language. Just as Augustine points out at the start of Book 4 of *On Christian Teaching* that a Christian ignores or avoids rhetoric at his own peril—he ignores the non-sacred at his own peril as well.

The non-sacred can actually allow for a richer, more complex expression than the religious alone. It is the non-sacred that makes complexity possible—in this way it can heighten and enrich the sacred. (*OCT*, p. 87)

It should be noted that fine rhetoric is a language that can appeal simultaneously to both the sacred and non-sacred realms. To paraphrase what Augustine says of rhetoric in Book Four of *On Christian Teaching* (p. 107), “one is not to follow the non-sacred world—but one’s wisdom should be attended by it—that is, couched in its best and most useful elements.” The word “useful” here means, of course, that which takes us to the divine.

Rhetoric, according to Augustine (*OCT*, p. 129), is more beautiful when its power derives from its subject matter (the divine things it is trying to reveal and elucidate)—and not from any power that it tries to generate from its “signage” alone.

To conclude, rhetoric can be a tangible verbal and/or written example of non-sacred signs at work in their pointing toward sacred truths. In this way, I would suggest that rhetoric is capable of serving as a microcosm and textual sample of the way in which the sacred and the non-sacred realms can successfully interact.

1. Frequently abbreviated hereafter as *OCT*. Page numbers refer to the Oxford World’s Classics 1997 edition translated and edited by R.P.H. Green. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)