

Article

Killjoy? Augustine on Pageantry

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Abstract: Augustine's position on civic spectacles should be evaluated in connection with his fears about a resurgence of paganism in late Roman North Africa. Notwithstanding contemporary claims that those fears were cover for early fifth-century prelatical efforts to manage commercial and political culture, evidence suggests that paganism in North Africa survived and was seductive.

Keywords: Augustine pageantry; paganism; theater; amphitheater; Emperor Honorius

Peter Brown characterizes late Roman rule as “theocracy tempered by inefficiency”. He refers to the uneven enforcement “at the local level” of the imperial chancery’s orders restricting the practice of traditional Roman religions. Brown reports that there was “very little government could do to enforce its own laws”. In the provinces, pageants, spectacles, theatrical performances and athletic contests honoring the gods continued. Christian prelates in North Africa opposed the proliferation of such pageantry. Although they were only intermittently successful, the “vacuum of power on ground level” that allowed what they considered superstition to draw congregants away from their faith’s rituals, as Brown concludes, “enabled bishops to rise in prominence” (Brown 2023). That they tried to use their prominence, prowess, and power to press for local enforcement of restrictions and for further edicts suppressing performances in the amphitheaters and theaters is incontestable. What is questionable is whether prelatical killjoys were intent on exaggerating the connections between civic pageants and paganism to reinforce the distinctiveness of Christianity or were genuinely fearful that the survival of the spectacles, plays, and games could lead to the resurgence of traditional cults. Could spectacles draw Christians from their faith and, worse, lead to a renewal of local or provincial persecutions of the faithful, who stayed the course, preferring the “joys” that bishops identified with their churches’ rituals? Their critics rioted during the late fourth and early fifth centuries in Africa, assaulting Christian clerics, stoning churches, causing murderous mayhem in at least one village, and proving persecution was an ever-present danger. Officials, as Brent Shaw suspects, may have been trying to preserve what was left of their municipalities’ statuary and “secular space[s]”, yet the polytheists were resentful of Christianity’s conspicuous presence and “fed a continual diet of hostile, disparaging, cynical, and mocking remarks about Christians”, Shaw allows, could well have construed local and provincial authorities reluctance to enforce imperial edicts as what Shaw calls “a ‘green light’ to advance to more aggressive acts”.¹

Evidence from the African provinces served by Bishop Augustine of Hippo Regius and his colleagues, particularly from Numidia and Proconsular Africa, supports the contention that they believed their faith to be endangered by pageants and spectacles and by superstitions associated with performances at the theaters and amphitheaters. The bishops’ responses were aggressively defensive. Augustine apparently believed his remarks in sermons and correspondence would have to compensate for the regime’s “inefficiency”. His exaggerations, we shall argue, were not proffered to invent dangers or to finish off what he knew to be the waning superstitions of a few. He could occasionally write and speak as if Christianity’s advance were unstoppable, yet he also feared that generally steadfast Christians, as well as recent converts, were drawn to pageants and spectacles. He



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claimed that funds, which ought to have been used to relieve poverty, were lavished on theatrical performances and athletic competitions. Amusements were subversive, seductive, and costly.

The churches' critics, however, accused provincial magistrates of coddling Christianity, and the faith's growth from the early fourth century seems to attest to the cogency of that criticism. Ending three centuries of intermittent persecutions, Emperor Constantine I (306–337) and his sons, as well as Emperor Theodosius I (379–395), were especially determined not to leave their relatively new religion's congregations unprotected. Theodosius's two sons continued the support given by their father, whom Christians all but beatified.² In Constantinople, Arcadius (383–408) forbade civic games and pageants at times when Christians were worshipping or commemorating their saints' sacrifices (Theod 1905). From Rome, Honorius (384–423) followed suit. Communiques circulated among regional magistrates reserved Sundays for the Christians' solemnities unless citizens were celebrating the emperors' birthdays.³

But, as noted at the start, the emperors' edicts were unevenly enforced. Many municipal and regional officials were more familiar with "the broad and blurred spectrum of possibilities", which Christopher Kelly identifies with paganism.⁴ They were more interested in seeing their citizens entertained in customary ways than in filling local churches. But Augustine badgered those officials. The atmospherics, he claimed, were all wrong; by drawing Emperor Constantine and his heirs to Christianity, God expected the faithful to enjoy a friendlier climate. Augustine's point: tolerating amusements that recalled superstitious practices disgraced the empire; churches and the government, he insinuated, were responsible for enlightening as well as for entertaining citizens. But he was addressing his congregants as well as the regime. He wanted to tug his congregants away from the *insania* or madness at the amphitheaters and theaters and to coax provincial and municipal authorities to his side of the rivalry with all those "possibilities" associated with polytheism and paganism. His sermons contrasted the *insania* with the sound doctrine available in churches. He distinguished the celestial joys—a foretaste of which was available in those churches—from the pleasures on offer at pageants. A case could be made that Augustine sensed, as Arnaldo Marcone does now, that religious life in fourth- and fifth-century North Africa was in transition, the direction of which could not be confidently predicted. Was Christianity a new departure or a cul-de-sac? Would pagan poetry or dramatists' scripts that stirred nostalgia for cultic practices ultimately prove more popular than Christian scriptures? Would athletes' and actors' virtuosity empty the churches because stories of the resourcefulness or genius of their faith's apostles paled by comparison? Would charioteers' courage and resolve fascinate citizens more than the fortitude and valor of the faith's martyrs? Augustine was determined to pillory the poets, impugn the actors, debase the games, and fortify Christianity. His God's revelations in sacred literature and in creation, which he called *divina spectacula*, did not just rival the pagans' performances; sacraments and sermons far surpassed them in meaning, mystery, and, he was tempted to add, entertainment.⁵

For Augustine, Christianity had a better product. Predictably, he set more store by what his faith's canonical texts revealed than new converts did, and he preached about his congregation's responsibility to keep them from regretting their choice to forego pagan pageantry. He directed veteran laity as well as clergy to fill their narratives with the marvels of their faith—Jesus' incarnation, miracles, martyrs' steadfastness—to mesmerize catechumens preparing for baptism. True, acrobats were gifted; they walked on high wires. But Jesus and the apostle Peter walked on water. Charioteers flaunted their ability to manage a few wild horses, yet pious Christians, inconspicuously though more consequentially, bridled their passions. Instead of watching spectacles, in effect, they became spectacles. Augustine and catholic Christian congregations—the city of God on pilgrimage in time—would not leave onlookers without much to admire. The humility and compassion of the faithful showed spectators what salvation looked like on this side of the grave.⁶ But Augustine worried that new converts were tempted to forgo the solemnity of their church's

celebrations for the revelry honoring the gods and deified emperors, for civic festivals and athletic spectacles, and even for the raucous rituals marking the midsummer solstice.⁷

Augustine complained that rival Donatist Christian churches indulged in lewd behavior. If we may trust his polemic, their bishops apparently allowed excessive drinking during festivals. And some were said to assist the Donatists in disrupting catholic Christian worship and harassing catholic clergy. Connections between those “assistants”, variously called *agonistici* or warriors and Circumcellions and Donatism seem rather tenuous, yet Augustine made the most of (some contend, he created) the former’s reputation for drinking and debauching unmarried women at their campsites.⁸ He clearly had a harder time distancing his version of the African catholic churches’ sober and somber Christianity from Christian practices elsewhere. For example, his congregants referred to reports that the Roman clergy were peculiarly promiscuous, citing Rome’s prestige and permissiveness when he preached on discipline. But Augustine was unmoved and explained that the challenges facing municipal officials in the old capital with a multicultural Christian population were different from challenges facing North African churches. Also, in Rome, the clergy had to cater to the customs of Christian travelers coming to the old capital on business. Hospitality required occasional indulgence. But, he insisted, disreputable conduct had no place in the African catholic Christian churches. True, Rome was *mater omnium*; the apostle Peter was said to have been its first bishop, but it was less important, Augustine went on, to be mindful of what Peter preached about continence than to cite lascivious behavior allowed in the basilica built on the site where he preached. The apostle discountenanced intemperance. And Christian churches that pampered the inner pagan in some Christians in Rome or Africa could not alter what their canonical literature commended.⁹

Still, popular, fashionable pastimes were hard to suppress. Augustine was amazed—or feigned amazement—that the depraved were everywhere in the late empire’s theaters (on-stage as well as among playgoers) and in the amphitheaters. What he took to be sacrilegious, superstitious activity at such venues encouraged unruliness, excess, and cruelty in society. He referred to them as demonic. Demons, he conjectured, took advantage of civic festivals honoring one or more of polytheists’ gods to inhabit images of the honorees and then to possess their admirers, luring them away from the God Christians worshipped.¹⁰ Leonardo Lugaresi aptly paraphrases the prelate’s concern: diabolical interventions seduced and corrupted the faithful, many of whom attended festivals and spectacles for the sake of camaraderie (Lugaresi 2008, p. 635). Augustine acknowledged that Emperor Honorius’s prohibitions were having some effect; he cited civic pageants’ diminishing popularity as a promising sign, but he regretted that the venues remained open; therefore, North African prelates were left to discourage what the government would not completely condemn.¹¹ As Maijastina Kahlos confirms, neither emperors nor local officials were inclined to do more than forbid profane festivals. Moreover, their governments had a much narrower definition of “the profane” than did the Christian churches (Kahlos 2019, p. 184).

Predictably, then, Augustine enjoined clerical colleagues and congregants to ensure that converts did not regret the loss of their former recreation and return to the pageants.¹² African clergy were to choreograph their celebrations of saints so that congregants’ collegiality never gave way to carousing. He imagined a diocese in which discreditable desires were tolerated. God’s mercy was infinite, pastors would say; mere mortals would be pardoned extravagances and even their taste for pantomimes, pageants, and spectacles, which encouraged residual pagan sentiments or exhibited outright nostalgia for Rome’s first gods.¹³ Yet, clearly, Augustine raised the issue of capering congregants and complaisant clerics to condemn both. Rome, as noted, was the exception. And despite his intimation that competitions between theaters and amphitheaters, on the one hand, and churches, on the other, often seemed to be tipping to the latter’s advantage, he feared that indigenous Africans, as well as the European refugees resettling there, might try to forget present crises by recovering the republic’s and empire’s pagan past. Military setbacks and political disintegration could have had those effects, and the Western Empire was beset by both in the early fifth century. The upshot, then: Augustine could simultaneously celebrate the

waning influence of diabolical distractions at the stadiums and theaters while remaining apprehensive about the resurgence of Christianity's pagan rivals. Every compromise with the competition, he supposed, contributed to the latter. From our perch in the twenty-first century, paganism's presence in late Roman civic pageantry, spectacles, and statuary might seem insufficiently formidable to overcome clerical efforts to enforce the regime's edicts and to encourage the government to make them more comprehensive. Yet his contemporary correspondents, readers, and auditors would have dismissed or ridiculed Augustine had there been no truth in his reports of actors, athletes, and their entourages, opulently attired, parading shamelessly in the streets.¹⁴

Political predicaments—specifically, the contraction of the Western Empire and the somewhat sudden, jarring defeats in Italy—seemed to call for austerity. But, Augustine was amazed that citizens in Africa clamored for extravagance.¹⁵ Sometime after 410, he composed an inauspicious status report and placed it alongside his effort to emphasize the distinctions between the joys of the celestial and terrestrial cities. In the latter, spectacles possessed athletes and actors but especially the spectators; demons masqueraded as gods and gloated as poets' accounts of the deities' preposterously adulterous exploits were dramatized. Mimes and pantomimes presented the foul as festive. No wonder then that Augustine—despite occasional references to the waning influence of cultic practices, pageants, and spectacles—confided, when debriefing readers of his *De civitate Dei*, that the competition between Christianity and polytheism was tilting the latter's way. Decency was disliked. Indecency on display drew crowds.¹⁶ Jupiter, for instance, the polytheists' master of storms and deity-in-chief, got nearly all his ovations in the theater for womanizing, according to Augustine, and as a notorious rapist.¹⁷ In impersonating Jupiter, the actors were unapologetic. His bravado and that of lesser yet equally lascivious deities (as well as the enthusiastic theatergoers who glowingly described their gods' sordid exploits) signaled what Donalee Dox, channeling Augustine's complaints, calls the stages' "basic incompatibility" with what Christian critics of pagans' amusements considered a moral society (Dox 2009).

Surprisingly, the escapades of lewd deities were incompatible with what the government appeared to be promoting. Ramsay MacMullen's survey of the differences that Christianity was making includes magistrates' decisions to punish sexual misconduct severely. Courts ceased treating adultery casually. "Roughness toward respectable women" became a serious offense (MacMullen 1986). Yet the spectacles thrived. Two centuries before Augustine circulated his objections, Tertullian of Carthage warned that obscene conduct on display served the devil's purposes. Richard Lim reminds us that, on that count, Augustine's offensive was not original. Similarly, the two early Christians added the charge of idolatry. Nonetheless, both Tertullian and Augustine found that accusation hard to stitch into their opposition because other monotheists, specifically Jews, thought little of worshipping a single God yet attending pageants and spectacles honoring many others. As Lim says, Jews simply did not think "supposed associations of public spectacles with the worship of the gods [were] such a stumbling block". To Tertullian and Augustine, however, performances in the theaters and amphitheaters were idolatrous as well as immoral (Lim 2012a, p. 140). Augustine was emphatic: the games' and plays' blend of the superstitious and salacious was subversive. The gods' lewd behavior onstage was less edifying—but more entertaining—than sermons. Games staged in the deities' honor supplied greater thrills than sacraments did. The faithful who came to church but who frequented spectacles as well seemed to Augustine only perfunctorily to participate in the former's—in their congregations'—solemnities.¹⁸

Taken from the temples on the emperors' orders and standing in or around the theaters and arenas, the pagans' sculpted images of their gods still offended Augustine. The statuary, in its new settings, proved to him that polytheists' initiatives were very much in play. Some apparently replied to him that they honored what the statuary signified. They revered the sun, not Apollo, or were awed by the seas, not by Neptune. Augustine included their disclaimers in his response that nothing was signified by the idols; the sun and seas

were parts of creation, and pagans were fools to venerate stones that represented gods, which were stand-ins for parts of creation. They should, instead, he continued, worship creation's one creator and redeemer.¹⁹ On that count, he bracketed spectacles, performances, and pageantry with the statuary, professing to follow Marcus Terentius Varro, who, he argued, conformed to the practices of pre-Christian Rome, though he secretly held that the statuary perpetuated a grand deception. Varro, who was admired by Cicero and known for his irreverence, suited Augustine's purposes perfectly. Varro maintained that the gods' publicists did the republic a great disservice, making superstitions respectable.²⁰ Augustine dismissed polytheists' explanations and charged that predatory pagan impresarios had persuaded impressionable citizens that images of deities surrounding them—onstage or in stone—were other than devious, malevolent demons.²¹ Predictably, he thought their ascendancy problematic. In a late sermon, he imagined demonic deities were themselves spectators watching as worshippers appropriated the repulsive behavior attributed to them and exhibited by actors impersonating them. Cruelty onstage begot cruelty offstage. The actors and athletes turned spectators into co-conspirators who subsidized the "decay of culture" that Augustine's sermons, correspondence, and the compendious *City of God* chronicled.²²

Augustine did not underestimate the magnitude of his challenge. Emperors legislated against excesses but used stadiums and games, as Richard Lim says, "to forge a close connection with . . . [their] subject population".²³ Provincial officials and civic elites in Africa were similarly "pragmatic". Archaeologists estimate that after a third-century upgrade, the arena in Carthage held as many as thirty thousand spectators.²⁴ There seems to have been no stadium in Hippo Regius, but archaeological evidence suggests that the theater was just across the market from Augustine's Basilica. See Gheris (2023). Despite the government's aforementioned effort to prohibit amusements from competing with Christians' worship, pagan patrons often staged their pageants, games, and plays illicitly. Augustine asked congregants to join him in dissuading neighbors from choosing spectacles over sermons.²⁵ For it was obvious to him that contests, comedies, and surrounding statuary were drenched in religious significance, and, if he is to be trusted, non-Christians with some authority over the faithful (as employers or clients) tempted or intimidated them to attend feasts and festivities associated with those celebrations and idols. His demythologizing remarks about the celebrations' origins' and his iconoclasm urged congregants to stand firm against such superstition (*state in Domino*).²⁶ And one sermon preached during the first few years of the fifth century speculated that, as Christians boycotted the venues, those who subsidized and produced the pageants or games or pantomimes would become discouraged. Festivities and plays, *sans* Christians, would become unprofitable and might finally disappear (*peribunt*).²⁷ Christians, *sans* rowdy festivities, feasts, and pageants, and, to Augustine's mind, thereby straightened up, would be more solemnly concerned with the religious politics in North Africa, for, as Leonardo Lugaresi suggests, he attributed the cheering and jeering that disrupted public discussions between catholic and Donatist prelates to the conduct onlookers thought acceptable at theaters and amphitheaters. Lugaresi (2008, p. 664, referring to *ep.* 47.6).

Prelatical rhetoric about the schism in the African church was often overheated, so the chances were slight that the laity listening to their bishops' invectives might be subdued. But it is more unlikely that many congregants would have boycotted pageants, games, and plays at their bishops' say-so. Augustine must have known that talk of such boycotts and of the impresarios' bankruptcy was well off the mark. He anticipated that many of the faithful were attached to their amusements and would brand their clerical critics as puritanical prelates who thought only the abstemious—only killjoys—could be Christians. *Tu solus christianus es?* Are you alone fit to be called a Christian? Augustine had them ask in one of his sermons on the Psalms. He suspected, however, that rejoinders of that sort reflected peer pressure, and, from this distance, it is difficult to forage for evidence to prove the contrary conclusively. Perhaps, then, he was right to presume that the spectacles' survival in some places depended on Christians' enthusiasm for them. And, conceivably,

some congregants who were particularly addicted to the games, races, and plays were smothering (*suffocat*) fellow parishioners' enthusiasm for Christianity.²⁸

Such was Augustine at his most pessimistic. Although he composed his *Confessiones* long after the experiences his narrative reported, they did expose the games' seductive powers. He so loved them and theater, he confided, that he lied and stole to get the price of admission.²⁹ His mockery of those addicted to the spectacles caught his friend Alypius unawares and turned him against the pageants. So, peer pressure could work in reverse.³⁰ But, as a prelate, Augustine was more intentional and, as we discovered, more polemical. In a sermon he preached several years after he confessed his early fondness for shows and celebrated Alypius's disaffection, a sermon on what Richard Lim describes as "the invincible attraction of public spectacles", Augustine was explicit about the power performances exercised over their devotees in his congregation (Lim 2012a, p. 143). They came to worship with him, but, in effect, they were absent. Their minds, or as he stated, their "hearts", were elsewhere. He was unrelenting. Perhaps peers lured them to the theater or to the games, he continued; their friends were fools and were "impious", but they were friends. The excitement of the games or the laughter at the theater came to possess them. They could not concentrate on his sermon, for, inwardly (*intus*), they were still at the theaters or the arenas. They were wrong to have gone and, doubly so—distracted—to remain there while in church.³¹ Whatever joys distracted them, Augustine claimed, paled by comparison with the celestial joys revealed in sacred literature and discussed in churches. But, to experience those joys, congregants had to heed an imperative that admitted no exceptions: *muta enim cupiditatem spectaculorum*; they must "change" and disavow their inordinate desires for unworthy spectacles to savor the churches' worthier alternatives. The amusements contented their residual paganism, and their gestures to polytheism made them reprehensible and emboldened Augustine emphatically to declare the theaters and amphitheaters off limits.³²

Granted that his was a self-serving declaration, the question raised at this study's start remains: were Augustine's volleys of criticism justified by a genuine pagan threat, or did he and his colleagues in Africa create the threat—or even paganism—by denouncing it. Did they, as Eric Rebillard contends, "paganize" parts of Roman society—including the pageants—that the elites preferred to "secularize"? On Rebillard's reading, Augustine was reluctant to write about the flourishing of his faith in order to portray "Christianization" as an ongoing battle to turn what Peter Brown noticed as their increasing political prominence to personal and greater political advantage Rebillard (1999). Richard Lim substantially agrees with Rebillard that the patrons of the games as well as of the theater were secularizing rather than paganizing a zone or "sanctuary into which particular elements of Roman culture could be placed for their own protection". The elites were not the pagans or polytheists or demons that populated Augustine's *City of God*, correspondence, and sermons. They were secularists, and they were joined by Christians who "wished to resist the totalizing demands that other Christians made in the name of their common religion"—Christians who argued that spectacles, pageants, and other performances "belonged to the *saeculum* and as such were permissible" for them to attend (Lim 2012b, p. 510).

Maijastina Kahlos, probing what she characterizes as "local religions" in late antiquity, has a somewhat different take on cultic "phenomena", which she also refuses to place "on the axis of Christianity and paganism". To say that religious phenomena were syncretistic or even hybrid, Kahlos continues, presumes that pure forms preexisted the mixtures, whereas multiple variations of the Christian faith competed for influence in North Africa, as did multiple pagan cults. But her presentation of local religion concludes close to where Lim and Rebillard leave Augustine and his colleagues, as "ideologues of separation" prone to deploy what Kahlos calls the "rhetoric of vilification". Yet by alluding to "adaptations" of religious practices, she inadvertently sets the context in which Augustine demanded "separation" from theatrical performances and civic festivals, which, if Lim and Rebillard are correct, merely stored what was left of paganism away as secular bits. Still, according to Kahlos, Christian prelates were mistaken to assume that, when deities frolicked onstage or,

say, Jupiter performed there as despot, adulterer, and rapist, they were other than relatively meaningless or, at least harmless secular celebrities, that is, secular “adaptations” or abbreviations of divinity. When he vilified paganism, polytheism, and superstition, Augustine created rather than reflected on a clear and present danger (Kahlos 2019, pp. 142–43).

If Lim, Rebillard, and Kahlos are correct, Augustine mistook secular ritual for residual paganism—perhaps deliberately. They appear to have inferred that, rather than anxiety gnawing at him, anxiety about the future of his faith, which could splinter if various congregations were to indulge different secular (or pagan) practices, ambition overwhelmed him and his colleagues. And scholars who suspect that he feigned fear also appear to understate his distaste for what he perceived as the irrationality of idolatry, which was related to his contempt for the theater. Both that distaste and his growing contempt surely followed from his having leafed through works by Platonists and Neoplatonists. One could argue that his education foreclosed on any chance that he would continue to indulge his passions for the theater and amphitheater Hugoniot (2000, vol. 2, pp. 785–86). Still, his pastoral work seldom explicitly summoned the philosophers. He concentrated on biblical revelations as well as on lessons from history and from recent events. For example, he relished the irony that Rome and the western provinces, which retained temples and statuary reminding citizens of the gods, were disintegrating while citizens in Constantinople, having dispossessed their deities and having turned many pagan temples into churches, lived in relative security.³³ That assessment was rather inaccurate; the Eastern Empire experienced considerable difficulties during the late fourth century. But Augustine’s rehearsals of the history of the empire and of the republic that preceded it deployed accounts of plagues, seditions, contention, conspiracies, and coups to make the same point: Rome’s old gods had been unreliable protectors. Factions consistently made the old capital quake, claimed the lives of innocents, and repeatedly left Italy desolate.³⁴

If the deities existed and were responsible for the devastation, Augustine implied, one would be wise to give them a wide berth, to steer clear of enactments and commemorations that honored their supposed (and more salacious) exploits. To do so, he believed, was to follow orator Cicero’s advice. Add Cicero then to the Platonists and Neoplatonists, to Christianity’s canonical texts, to history, and, as noted, to Varro. They created—with Augustine, Tertullian, and their clerical colleagues—a choir of killjoys, scandalized by those who irrationally—superstitiously—celebrated the deities’ antics, which, Cicero, on Augustine’s reading, thought more self-abasing than any enterprise ever imagined humans (*abiection*). But absurd stories circulated to illustrate the horrific lengths to which the demonic deities would go to keep citizens from discontinuing the games and plays that attested to some level of loyalty to Rome’s traditional religions.³⁵ Such stories proved what Brent Shaw confirms: the gods and games “were indeed embedded in the everyday life of the nobles” as well as in the lives of Maijastina Kahlos’s locals. Augustine’s take was similar: the continuity of cultic practices, spectacles, and the pageants honoring the gods foolishly reinforced what Shaw characterizes as “the operative values” that governed Romans’ perceptions of “civic piety and politics” (Shaw 2011, pp. 197–98).

Those were not values Augustine shared. Civic piety fell below the standards he set for ordering society. But that could not be helped. There were times on this side of the grave when the unrighteous ruled over the righteous. God’s ways with the world were mysterious, but Christians should be reassured by their faith and by canonical texts that the supremacy of the wicked would not endure forever.³⁶ As Robert Markus suggests, Augustine clearly had not joined the ranks of the shrill “puritanical moralists” pressing for an accelerated Christian takeover of secular culture. Yet Markus, who is chiefly concerned to clear space—and to discover Augustine clearing space—for a secularization of political culture, misses his subject’s equivalence between superstition and secularization. Augustine was not plumbing for some “intermediate realm” between profane and sacred spheres of influence, for a place where pageants and performances unrelated to his faith might continue to attract the irrational and superstitious as well as seduce otherwise reasonable spectators. As Christoph Hugoniot supposes—and as argued here—Augustine was aggres-

sively defensive because he was genuinely fearful. What Hugoniot calls his “encyclopedic erudition” enabled him to detect residual paganism in what now seems to his recent critics to have been “desacralized” and secular.³⁷

Late fourth-century pagan efforts to limit the effects of Christian critics’ overtures to the government suggest that Augustine did not need to pick through earlier centuries to find persons of influence for whom fortune depended on appeasing their gods. Several years before he began his clerical career in Africa, Antiochene orator Libanios, who had been the pagan revival’s most renowned publicist during the short reign of Emperor Julian, warned Emperor Theodosius against dishonoring the deities. If idols were destroyed, Libanios held, citizens would go unprotected.³⁸ Augustine did not mention Libanios in the undated letters in which he looked to enlighten and console a correspondent whose views apparently corresponded with those of the famous orator who was convinced that living well was insufficient to ensure divine favor as long as obstacles contrived by Christians and by the government curtailed his participation in cultic observances, which Augustine thought superfluous as well as superstitious. And, as we now know, he could have cited Cicero, Varro, and others to substantiate as much.³⁹ Moreover, several years after Libanios mocked Christians for lavishing time and expense on the upkeep of martyrs’ shrines, Augustine ridiculed pagans for spending to gild their statues of Hercules.⁴⁰

If we may trust one of his many sermons on charity, competition for funds was intense. He resented the Christians of his acquaintance who directed their “charity” to performers in the theaters and arenas. That was not the *caritas* commended by their sacred literature, Augustine explained; their largesse and, more generally, the civic philanthropy of patrons of pageants and other public performances hardly qualified as the generosity his faith identified with compassion. Even if donors did not think of their donations as payment for protection or as appeasement, their gifts to sinners—to actors impersonating deities or charioteers in games honoring the gods—were sinful. To be sure, gifts to relieve the poverty of any mortal were gifts to sinners, for unbelievers—but also the faithful who were absolved by baptism—necessarily continued to sin, Augustine told his congregants, adding that their gifts should never be given to indulge or reward athletes’ and actors’ shameful conduct. Proper charitable donors advanced God’s regenerative work, he continued, whereas improper donations enabled performers and prurient citizens to remain in (and to enjoy) their degenerative condition. Moreover, subsidies made performers’ disgraceful vocations seem attractive to others. It was bad enough that Christians joined others in stadiums and theaters. Worse still, they paid to sponsor celebrities in sports and entertainment dignifying traditional Roman religions’ deities.⁴¹

Even if civic pride rather than protection drew persons to the pageants and moved patrons to pay actors and athletes stipends that complemented their salaries from public funds, Augustine thought the entire enterprise ignominious. Spectators and benefactors reprehensibly encouraged discreditable desires as well as incivility at profane games and plays, he told the Christians of Bulla Regia, through which he regularly traveled from his diocese to Carthage and back. Bulla Regia was known for such entertainments. It looks to have been the African equivalent of South Bank or Shoreditch. Residents were proud of its reputation; tourists were good for local business. Augustine stopped to preach and to reprimand local congregants for caring more for the pleasures or joys on offer in this world than for their celestial and everlasting joy. It was inexcusable to allow one’s city to be known for its perversions.⁴²

Augustine’s efforts to have governments intervene continued. He took the conversion of emperors to Christianity as a sign that God enlisted imperial, provincial, and municipal regimes to encourage good and prohibit wickedness.⁴³ On that count, the entertainment industry seemed ripe for reform. His encomium for Emperor Theodosius credited him with having given the go-ahead for a comprehensive and muscular campaign against paganism in Africa.⁴⁴ He formulated his flattering account of Theodosius’s piety and policy, notwithstanding his experience with the inadequacy of the latter when stacked against inveterate cultic loyalties. Augustine had come to realize that edicts and protocols could not

complete what Maijastina Kahlos calls the “inversion of the Roman conception” of religious practice, whereby pagans had classified Christians’ faith as *superstitio*. The “inversion” to which Kahlos refers would have flipped concepts: *superstitio*, instead, would refer to cults and to cultic practices camouflaged in civic celebrations along with what remained of idolatry, dramatizations of deities’ misadventures, the popularity of diviners, and the association of pagan statuary with civic pride. And Christianity would be acknowledged as “the only proper *religio*”.⁴⁵ African religious culture did tilt in that direction, though, as H. A. Drake concedes, despite a “coercive turn” in anti-pagan legislation, grounds exist for depicting the government as “soft on paganism”. To a point, they were intolerant, but, Drake continues, “intolerance is simply too slender a reed” to support the “model of tolerant pagan-intolerant Christian”. Governments, attentive to “threats to core community values”, balanced those of Augustine against those who filled theaters and amphitheaters (Drake (2011)).

But Christianity was quickly becoming a “core community value” in late Roman Africa. One could argue that it was gradually displacing the values long associated with cultic practices soon after Emperor Constantine eliminated his last rival in 321. During the early fifth century, as we learned at the start of this study, Christian prelates’ prominence gained them some political leverage, yet local and regional magistrates were not inclined to kill joy to conform to their wishes. When triumphalism seeped into his appeals, Augustine would demand just that. Widely circulated oracles had predicted that his faith would become extinct by the middle of the fourth century. He harped on their inaccuracy. Instead, he pointed out, Emperor Honorius’s agents levelled some temples and smashed idols in Carthage fifty years later. Even as he celebrated Honorius’s agents’ iconoclasm, however, Augustine reminded readers of his *City of God* that Christians were pilgrims in time. Their congregations were *permixta*, populated by the righteous and unrighteous. They could count on politically influential elites for some temporal advantages in their competition with polytheists and with others nostalgic for the old cults, but the righteous would be wrong to assume that results would exceed the barely bearable. In the same passage that pounced on and scoffed at the oracle’s inaccuracy and his faith’s survival into the fifth century, Augustine clarified that Christians’ hopes and affections were vastly different from those of others who expressed their hopes in wagers at the races and displayed their affections in gifts to actors and athletes.⁴⁶ That different hope inhabiting the faithful suggested to Augustine a different, divergent joy as well, a celestial joy that his congregants jeopardized when they elected to frequent civic festivals and other amusements on offer at the theaters or amphitheaters. If they were looking for catharsis, they ought to come to church or assemble for celebrations at the shrines where stories of their faith’s martyrs’ fortitude could inspire them. Leonardo Lugaresi refers to the “spectacles” played out within the faithful on listening to those stories as prelatical killjoys’ preferred form of “entertainment” (Lugaresi (2008, pp. 681–82). They offered the faithful their faith’s most precious possession: hope. In a treatise composed before he distinguished between celestial and temporal joys in his *City of God*, Augustine depicted hope as the way Christians, while still in time, could live with their risen savior. And, without mentioning theaters or amphitheaters, he stipulated that the hopeful could only do so if they avoided gathering where the vain indulged their pleasures.⁴⁷

So, Augustine was a killjoy. The seductive, addictive pleasures in the arenas and theaters, to his mind, brought the faithful perilously close to the irrational, superstitious, and—he feared—the contagious. Christianity appeared to him insufficiently established to stave off a resurgence of Rome’s traditional religions. To him, therefore, the most lethal killjoys were elsewhere; they were the patrons and performers catering to persons’ base desires, turning them into casualties, dissuading or distracting them from experiencing the foretaste of the celestial joys that awaited among their coreligionists.

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Notes

- 1 Shaw (2011, p. 251) Shaw doubts the reports of bedlam in some cities, but, for the riots in Calama, see Kaufman (2003, pp. 22–35), and, for the massacre in Sufes, see Augustine’s report in *ep.* 50. In what follows, abbreviations of Augustine’s work correspond to those devised by Karl-Heinz Chelius for the *Augustinus-Lexikon*. My translations and paraphrases were composed after consulting the relevant volumes of the *Corpus Christianorum, series Latina*, the *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, and Jacques Paul Migne’s *Patrologia cursus completes, series Latina*, volumes 32 to 45.
- 2 See Augustine’s tribute, *Civ.* 5.26.
- 3 For example, Theod (1905).
- 4 Kelly (2015), 194 characterizes “paganism” as a “lump word” denoting those “possibilities” that seemed superstitious to Christian critics.
- 5 *En. Ps.* 80.1 and 80.23.
- 6 *En. Ps.* 39.9–11; *en. Ps.* 76.8; Lim (2012a, pp. 147–48).
- 7 *S.* 279.13. Also, more generally, see Jones (2012).
- 8 *C. litt. Pet.* 2.88.195 (*iocandi, bibendi, pernoctandi licentiam*). Also see *Cresc.* 3.43.47 and *en. Ps.* 132.3. I use the lower case “c” for catholic to distinguish the Christianity Augustine and his catholic colleagues contrasted with what Donatist sectarians developed when they supposedly seceded from the universal (or Catholic) church that subscribed to arguments for the faith’s universality and that rejected claims that the term “catholic” designated purity.
- 9 *Ep.* 29.10–11.
- 10 *Civ.* 6.4.
- 11 *S.* 293B.5: *ista minuuntur . . . sed nondum ita consumpta sunt.*
- 12 *En. Ps.* 43.22.
- 13 *S.* 48.6.
- 14 *Civ.* 7.26 (*contra omnem verecundiam*).
- 15 *Civ.* 2.20.
- 16 *Civ.* 2.26: *quod malum geritur omnes convocat spectatores.*
- 17 *Civ.* 7.11.
- 18 See Hugoniot (2000, vol. 1, pp. 598–605; vol. 2, pp. 761–66). For similar opposition in Antioch, see Leyerle (2001).
- 19 *S.* 198 augm. 35–36. For a concise commentary on the sermon’s context, see Lamb (2022).
- 20 *Civ.* 4.9 and *civ.* 6.2.
- 21 *Civ.* 4.1 (*malignissimos ac fallacissimos daemones*).
- 22 *S.* 198.3.
- 23 Lim (2012b, p. 508), referring to Emperor Constantius’s *adventus* (357) and the races he sponsored at the Circus Maximus in Rome.
- 24 Bomgardner (1989). Also consult Mahjoubi (2000).
- 25 *Io. ev. tr.* 10.9.
- 26 *S.* 62.12.
- 27 *S.* 279.13.
- 28 *En. Ps.* 93.20.
- 29 *Conf.* 1.19.30.
- 30 *Conf.* 6.12.
- 31 *En. Ps.* 25(2). 9.
- 32 *S.* 313A.3: *Audeo prohibere spectacula? Audeo prohibere, audeo plane.*
- 33 *S.* 105.12.
- 34 For example, *civ.* 3.23 (*quantam Italiae vastationem desertionemque fecerunt*).
- 35 *Civ.* 4.26.
- 36 *En. Ps.* 124.8.
- 37 Compare (Hugoniot 2000, vol. 2, p. 766) with Markus (1990, pp. 133–35).
- 38 Libanios (1963); For Libanios and Julian, see Nesselrath (2012, p. 88).
- 39 *Eps.* 233–35, especially *ep.* 235.2.

- 40 Compare *ep.* 24.6 with Nesselrath (2012, pp. 66–68).
 41 *En. Ps.* 102.13.
 42 S. 301A.7–8: quis excusat ab hac turpitudine?
 43 *Cresc.* 3.51.56: bona jubeant, mala prohibeant.
 44 *Civ.* 5.26.
 45 Kahlos (2019, p. 204), citing *doctr. chr.* 2.20.30 and 2.23.36.
 46 *Civ.* 18.54.
 47 C. *ep. Parm.* 3.5.27: non enim sedebit in conventiculo vanitatis.

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