

ST AUGUSTINE'S SIN

WHY CHILD ABUSE
BEDEVILS
CHRISTIANITY

Joseph
Baker

*“ It tackles – head on – an important and pressing subject...
it’s vital stuff. It’s about how we safeguard young people,
how we grow up, how we interact with others.”*

— Karl French, literary reviewer —



What reviewers have said:

“This is potentially of interest to anyone concerned with how we grow up, how we are shaped, and how the way that young people are drawn into whatever religious faith into which they are born, how this supposedly, avowedly benign process is enacted can have deeply malign effects on the individual and so on society in general. It tackles – head-on – an important and pressing subject... it’s vital stuff. It’s about how we safeguard young people, how we grow up, how we interact with others.”

—KARL FRENCH—

Literary Reviewer

“Awesome how far Augustine’s tentacles of guilt and sinfulness reach. Alone among the world’s civilised nations, Britons are allowed to physically punish children because unelected bishops sitting in the House of Lords advocate it.”

—CAROLYN THOMPSON—

Reader

“It takes us directly to a seemingly real situation with flesh and blood people. The menace in the good father’s every action is tangible, and what isn’t said adds to the sense of danger.”

—ALAN WILKINSON—

Literary Reviewer

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Joseph Baker

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Editor and contributor:

Lorna Graham, who authored chapters 12 and 13.

To Dad

CONTENTS

Illustrations		ix
Acknowledgements		xi
Foreword		xiii
Introduction		1
Chapter 1	The Wickedness of St Augustine	15
Chapter 2	The Dark Imprint from Augustine’s Sin of Sexual Lust	27
Chapter 3	How I was Hard-Wired with Augustinian Guilt	37
Chapter 4	The ‘Religiosity Gap’ in Mental Health Provision	51
Chapter 5	Spiritual Well-being and Augustine’s Unsound Mores	65
Chapter 6	A Personal Study of Punishment, Blessed by St Augustine	77
Chapter 7	‘In Persona Christi’ – The Disgrace of Instant Forgiveness	85
Chapter 8	Are We Born Evil? Science and Augustinian Guilt	97

Chapter 9 Augustine’s Torment Embedded in Western Mores 109

Chapter 10 Child Sexual Abuse and the Augustinian Factor 125

Chapter 11 Clerical Child Abuse and Augustine’s Influence 139

Chapter 12 Religious Tolerance, Faith Schools and Sin 155

Chapter 13 From Pupil to Teacher – a Journey Out of Shame 173

About the Author 185

Endnotes 187

ILLUSTRATIONS

Front cover. Baroque statue of Saint Augustine, created in 1708, which is now placed on medieval Charles Bridge in Prague, Czech Republic. The statue depicts Augustine wearing a mitre and holding a bishop's crook in one hand and a burning heart in the other. An undressed child kneels amid shed clothes at his feet.

Figure 1. The Warren Cup 15BC–15AD	18
Figure 2. St Philip's RC Home for Boys, Edgbaston, Birmingham	40
Figure 3. German Army belt buckle from WW1	81
Figure 4. Christian symbols flaunted by Trump supporters, USA, January 2021	121
Figure 5. OpDarknet sting map showing distribution of child abuse images	135
Figure 6. Chart of child sexual abuse by clerics in England and Wales 2019	152

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Finally, thanks to you, my readers. Whatever your beliefs, my hope is that after scanning these pages you feel as passionate as I do about the value of an open education for all British children. Today, children in some schools are being insidiously misinformed.

ST AUGUSTINE'S SIN

To properly safeguard our young and defend our liberal way of life for the future, religious studies should be taught from an objective, critical and pluralistic viewpoint so that children are well placed to make up their own minds what to believe and what to doubt.

FOREWORD

Every week we are contacted by members of the public from all backgrounds annoyed, angered and aggrieved by the inappropriate imposition of religion in their schools. In England three in ten live in areas with little or no choice but a faith school and every year 20,000 pupils are assigned faith schools against their families' preferences. Every week we hear from those locked out of suitable local schools by discriminatory admissions. We speak to parents shocked to find their children being directed to pray in schools or proselytized to in religious education. We speak with teachers facing religious discrimination in employment, or uncomfortable with evangelical visits and pupils experiencing discriminatory sex education. We deal with the extreme examples that can only be called indoctrination and a large range of more subtle problems arising from the privileging of religion.

As coordinator of the 'No More Faith Schools' campaign I am happy to write this brief foreword for the authors, both members of NSS and committed to our goal of removing the connection between religion and state. The evidence of harm presented here should give the government cause to reconsider funding schools organised round and promoting exclusive religions.

Around one in three publicly funded schools in England & Wales are faith schools, i.e., they have an official religious designation or ethos. Scottish and Northern Irish schools are still strongly divided along sectarian lines. Abuses of children's rights are common in religious schools beyond the state sector. While we do not oppose independent private religious schools, we are increasingly active

in challenging schools where the most basic standards of secular education and even health and safety are often sacrificed in the prioritisation of faith formation.

Our principled opposition to faith schools, comes not from any antipathy towards religion but from our support for children's independent right to develop their own beliefs free from religious discrimination or control. Principles we are glad to see supported by many people of faith, but fiercely resisted by the religious establishment.

The authors of this book have taken aim at that establishment and their arguments will be persuasive to any open-minded reader. Two lines of their argument are particularly relevant to our campaigning.

The first is that the religious establishment that plays such a large role in state education – spearheaded by the Church of England – is increasingly disconnected from the population it seeks to lead. Yet the Church relies on this persona of kindly teacher of the nation and heart of the community to justify its role in education. This disconnect – seen in the consistent and dramatic decline in church attendance, and a growing majority of non-religious citizens – makes the increasing role of religion in schools even more incongruous. Many are driven away by the Church's institutional homophobia and ideas about 'sin' which are deeply disconnected from the moral zeitgeist. The hypocrisy of this moralising while the Church remains mired in safeguarding and clerical abuse scandals, with more than 100 cases of clerical child sex abuse reported every year, is clear for all to see. Time and again such lax safeguarding is enabled by the state authorities' continuing deference engendered by the Church's establishment status.

Secondly, we increasingly view children not as vassals or property of their parents, but as independent rights holders. Modern pedagogies view the purpose of education as enabling self-actualisation, preparing children with the knowledge and skills to take their own path in life. The idea of education focusing on obedience and

FOREWORD

moulding unruly children feels like a relic of the last century. But the ideas that children are inherently sinful, that they need instruction to follow the correct path, and that parents choose children's beliefs, are kept alive, albeit often in a weakened state, by religious influence over education.

Alastair Lichten

Head of education, National Secular Society

INTRODUCTION

*Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.*

—A HYMN TO GOD THE FATHER BY JOHN DONNE—

Whether or not religion spawns tension and violence around the world is an issue that has been exhaustively discussed elsewhere, and is beyond the modest ambitions of this book. What I hope to do is show how the teaching in certain schools can disadvantage children who are, as I was, imaginative and impressionable. Having a sensitive nature is a positive attribute: it is what makes us human. However, sensitive individuals are especially susceptible to corrosive feelings of guilt and shame. These feelings are sharpened by the relentless burden of culpability imputed by Augustine of Hippo, one of Christianity's foremost saints. St Augustine deemed all humans inherently depraved and sinful, from birth. We will look at Augustine's fourth century teaching and the subjective effect of the drill and doctrine imposed on infants in some faith schools today. Modern thinking, and the new research that we will review, challenges Augustine's dismal verdict on the human condition. We will explore the state's long collaboration with the church, which ensures Augustine's archaic preoccupation with sinfulness continues to be ingrained into the minds of all British infants. Reviewing evidence of the influence

Augustine's ideas have on the long-term mental well-being of apostates, we discover that this group is widely misrepresented in academic research endorsing religious belief. Finally, noting that clerical child sexual abuse (cCSA) continues to bedevil church institutions today, we consider whether instruction in Augustinian theology might play a role in cCSA. From time to time, I will intrude with examples from my own experience as a follower and former acolyte. I will show how Augustine's sin-centred teaching stimulated and sustained a negative mental schema that I endured for much of my life.

A friend of mine shared an instructive story. He said, 'My dad hated seeing people baring an open mouth. When I was a boy, he often used to say that if a fly gets in your mouth, your teeth will turn black and fall out. I am in my forties now, and I know that he was joking, but to this day I close my mouth if I see a fly. It's instinctive: half the time I don't realise I'm doing it.'

Church leaders have long understood young brains can be moulded, the idea turns up in the Bible. The founder of my old school, Cardinal John Henry Newman (recently canonised and now St Newman), wrote in his school notebook, 'Train up a child in the way he should go, and, when he is old, he will not depart from it.'¹ Reading the reports of evasiveness by the Vatican in response to the disclosures of cCSA,² I thought back to my childhood and the religious education (RE) that I had undergone in schools. Existing literature offers implausible rationalisations for cCSA, while my memory of school drill in rites and rituals offers an explanation that I find persuasive, and it reaches back in history to implicate that keystone of Western Christianity, St Augustine. It occurred to me that teaching Augustine's ideas might inadvertently build a favourable grounding for the subsequent exploitation of a child.

St Augustine, whose literature informs Christian faith, was a tormented man writing in unenlightened times. A revered doctor of the church, he is held up as a role model for healthy spiritual development. Yet, as bishop of Hippo, he advocated a dubious moral code and he wrote disgusting tracts about infant sexuality. Later, when we examine his life, we will review the historical background that

helps explain this apparent paradox. We will evaluate the soundness of his ideas, which are not just tolerated but compulsorily taught to infants as definitive in Britain's schools.

As soon as I could speak, my mother told me what all infants in Christian households are told, that I was born with original sin and I had been baptised to wash the sin out. Later in life I learned that original sin is Augustine's mark of guilt for concupiscence (sexual lust),³ which by his decree is ineradicable. In his autobiographical works, Augustine wrote of 'filth' and the 'itch of lust in infants',⁴ declaring that babies are born stained with guilt from original sin, the sin of sexual lust. He reframed baptism to do away with the sinful flesh, but he held that lust is not removed.⁵

When I started my own family, Augustine's idea that children are contaminated by the lust of their parents in conceiving them was hideous and repugnant. In the Augustinian view, a baby is not innocent and unsullied, with potential for self-determination. Rather, a child is born in sexual sin and needs external regulation for the rest of its life to control its lustful impulses. Most Christian adults take a blithe view of original sin and many will be unfamiliar with the significance of the rite of baptism. However, St Augustine's teaching is required reading for church men and women who learn that baptism does not entirely cleanse original sin. Sexual lust is dampened down but some concupiscence remains in a baptised infant, a doctrine endorsed in the catechism of the Catholic Church.⁶

Teachers and parents might overlook or ignore the sexual connotations, but we will see how clergy focus their lives on scripture. The overwhelming majority of priests and vicars I meet seem kindly and well meaning, yet they insist children are born marked with the stain of original sin.⁷ If they did not believe Augustine's doctrine that there was sin from carnal guilt in little children that needed acknowledgement and forgiveness, they would not solemnise baptism, because sacramental grace to douse lust would be superfluous.

Augustinian theology is the bedrock of Christian faith in the Western Church, inculcating notions of personal guilt and sin. RE

is required and funded by the government, and schools in the UK are obliged by law to promote Augustine's fatalistic doctrines.⁸ In fact, only 60% of primary schools currently comply,⁹ but in these schools RE helps shape the lives of nearly one half of British infants.¹⁰ These children are having their life chances affected by reciting unhelpful prayers like the ones we will review in chapter two. Infants are told they were inflicted at birth with the stain of original sin. As these children grow up, clerics, supported by teachers and childcare workers, reinforce the disgrace they administered by getting children to perform Augustine's penitential admission of wrongdoing and making them beg for forgiveness and mercy.¹¹ Chapter 3 draws attention to how impressionable infants are inculcated with these unhelpful ideas. Reviewing primary school curricula, we find Augustine's hair-shirt ritual of self-inflicted guilt and censure is still recited by infants in faith schools.¹² Receptive young minds are repetitively weighed down with his ancient creed of mock sinfulness and self-blame.

Teachers on both sides of the Atlantic used to put dull pupils in a corner and make them wear a pointy **dunce cap**. This practice of open humiliation was scrapped 100 years ago. Yet today the state supports schools that publicly shame children with Augustine's contrived guilt. In 1927, British philosopher and Nobel laureate Bertrand Russell declared 'People in church debasing themselves and saying they are miserable sinners, and all the rest of it, seems contemptible and not worthy of self-respecting human beings.' Nearly a century later the cradle of Russell's intellect still requires infants to be indoctrinated in these self-abusive terms. The pages that follow examine the background to this shameful tradition, how it is enforced and propagated in today's schools, how it inhibits some children and how it might tempt acts of cCSA. Here we unravel how discriminatory government appointments ensure the perpetuation of Augustine's negative creed.

My RE was actually Augustinian indoctrination, similar to that in many faith schools, and as you progress through these pages it will become clear why I take pains to make this distinction. Shrewd

intellectual critiques of religion by Anthony Grayling, Richard Dawkins, Victor Stenger, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Dan Barker and the late and much-lamented Christopher Hitchens, among many others, fill the bookshelves. But these great men cannot speak for those who spent years being indoctrinated and drilled, as I was, in Augustine's undignified ideology.

RE was plain and simple in my schooldays, but for today's schoolchildren it is technically sophisticated. Demand for religious content is sufficient to sustain commercial producers offering slick media presentations, including Augustine's penitential pleading. Using well-conducted research studies we examine how school drill and doctrine instils Augustine's potentially disturbing ideas in young minds. Then we look at some of the measurable outcomes in affected Western societies. I will argue that Christianity's Augustinian teaching can have enduring and far-reaching effects on some children into adulthood. We will compare his primitive ideas with recent scientific discoveries and then review compelling evidence that the attitude of adults towards children is shaped by Augustine's unsafe teaching.

Almost all children (99%) schooled in Britain today will go on to renounce religion soon afterwards, as I did.¹³ Unfortunately, apart from the wasted hours of misspent lesson time, repudiation does not promptly disengage the billions of neural connections made in the brain during a child's formative years.¹⁴ I, and countless other apostates, have experienced distress caused by the RE we received in childhood. Little rigorous research has been published regarding the lifelong effect of instilling Augustine's ideas in young people.¹⁵ Indoctrination of minors as a factor contributing to mental ill-health is surprisingly lacking from that literature which does exist. The possible effect of sustained drilling on the minds of receptive infants has not escaped notice entirely, but research presents particular challenges. In extreme cases, RE gives rise to trauma,¹⁶ but the milder upset borne by others is unrecorded and quietly disregarded. We will look at the work that has been done and the difficulties involved in the study of religion. Comparing diverse cultures, we see how

Augustinian guilt is so prevalent in Western societies it has become normalised. Here we will learn why existing literature claiming benefits for religiosity is unreliable, and we hear about a surprising inhibition reported by psychologists to explain why this field of study is shunned by academia.

The mental scars inflicted by my upbringing in a Roman Catholic (RC) community still mark me. Following my parents' alienation at the behest of a priest, my mother sent me to a Catholic boarding school where I encountered abuse. Reading the many reports of child exploitation and sexual abuse and reflecting on my own experiences, I was moved to speculate why the Christian community appears to hold an unduly liberal attitude towards the mistreatment of children. It is not just clerics who shock us with their abuse of children. Nuns also seem disposed to mistreat young people, as the unmarried mothers-to-be care homes scandals noted here show. Examining the literature, we question why some ecclesiastics seem to have a disdainful view of children, typified by my indecent clerical beating overseen by nuns, described in chapter 6. We review speeches by bishops in the House of Lords to discover why the English, unlike other secular populations, continue to permit children to be physically punished in the home.

Augustine's version of the ritual known as penance, also called confession or reconciliation (meaning reconciliation with God, not with the victim of wrongdoing), is morally questionable. His doctrine, discussed in chapter 7, teaches children a moral code of mock culpability, secretive disengaged justice, and arbitrary retribution, which conflicts with the principles of fairness accepted by enlightened societies. I recall the sense of ambivalence and the moral limbo I experienced in my adolescence as I struggled to resolve the confusing beliefs I had been indoctrinated with – beliefs that I did not value and did not own.

Followers deem that when a priest forgives transgressions, he stands as Christ, in person. We look behind the Latin phrase **in Persona Christi**, the title given to Catholic priests by the pope, meaning that

a priest stands 'in the person of Christ', which allows priests to forgive sins. Although generally associated with Catholicism, all Western denominations offer to forgive transgressions without thought or consideration for the aggrieved party. Christians are accountable only to a confessor for wrongdoing and the confessor is compelled by canon law to absolve the penitent if they are contrite and accepts a penance, usually prayers to the saints. If a believer is sorry and has confessed, forgiveness is guaranteed by canon law regardless of any moral or judicial considerations. Those who find comfort in religion can develop ethical blind spots or maladaptive feelings of guilt, and we will examine these issues as we progress. We go on to consider enlightened concepts of decency and fair play compared with Augustine's ancient philosophy. We explore contemporary approaches to wrongdoing which displace Augustinian ideas with evidence-based methodologies. Government research demonstrates the superiority of progressive judicial systems like restorative justice.

We have considered Augustine's readings on the doctrines of original sin, penance and sacrifice. In chapter 8 we are ready to sift the moral lessons these ideas teach our schoolchildren. Augustine thought humans were born wicked and predisposed to being bad and sinful. He taught that only the Christian God can distinguish right from wrong. Acts of goodness can only be achieved by means of God's grace, and forgiveness is His sole prerogative. We look at game changing advances made by British researchers in identifying the source of human morality and we find Augustine was wrong. Far from his doctrine of preordained human wickedness, science reveals we are born with a socially positive and valuable sense of cooperation and fair play. This valuable sense of right and wrong that has evolved in humans predates Augustine by thousands of years. Telling children that they were born wicked and are predisposed to evil is not only potentially harmful, it is also dishonest.

Examining psychologists' assessments of Augustine's state of mind, we take time out here and allow ourselves to speculate upon why he took the view he did. Aided by expert study, this

light-hearted digression offers a fascinating theory that could account for Augustine's dark psyche. No other country in the world demands all its children be indoctrinated in outdated Augustinian values. We uncover the sordid reason why the British state alone continues its headlong charge in a direction opposite to the wishes and needs of the majority of its citizens.

In the course of my research for this book I have encountered thousands of accounts from adults articulating feelings of exploitation and betrayal by their evangelical schoolteachers.¹⁷ Like me, these individuals were too naïve to demur as infants. Now, many express a view like mine; that their schooling punished them. Here we review some of the disturbing ideas and images infants are being exposed to in faith schools. It is hard to disagree with Dawkins when he claims that religious indoctrination is a form of child abuse.¹⁸ Dawkins was criticised by Augustinian apologists for insulting people who have endured physical child abuse, but having been abused mentally and physically myself I can speak from both sides of the argument. However, the term **abuse** is contentious and I prefer to describe religious indoctrination as a form of punishment. According to Merriam-Webster, punishment is 'suffering, pain, or loss that serves as retribution'.¹⁹ Indoctrination in Augustine's ideas undoubtedly punishes some children, and the evidence for that claim is contained in these pages, which recount my childhood experience.

Reviewing judicial reports and criminal records, we look at the backgrounds of convicted child sex offenders and the personal histories of the world's most notorious distributors of child pornography, to identify a correlative influence. With caveats regarding data collection and acknowledging international and cultural inconsistencies in defining child abuse, we move on to investigate recent records of 'darknet' internet child pornography. Then we compare that data with countries where Augustine's followers are dominant.

Chapter 11 trawls through the many theories that have been posited to explain the aberration that is cCSA. We have noted the remarkable paucity of rigorous research in this field. In the absence

of clear evidence, the cause of clerical cCSA is open to speculation. A report commissioned by the Catholic Church itself implies that nearly three quarters of victims of predatory clerics fell within the range that would identify the abusers as paedophiles, according to the clinicians' manual. We consider whether the Augustinian theology nuns and clerics are taught regarding infant concupiscence might be a factor in cCSA. Could Augustine's doctrines on infantile guilt and culpability be unconsciously moulding the attitude of clerics towards young people? The church's report goes on to confirm that the indoctrination clergy receive in seminaries is a factor in cases of cCSA. Here is testimony from the church itself, admitting the far-reaching influence of Augustine's unsafe ideas.

In the last few decades, the Christian communion has been confronted with an avalanche of cCSA cases from around the world. Most claims involve Catholic priests, but thousands of Church of England (C of E) clerics have also been implicated in cCSA. Although the Catholic community has the most cases of abuse at the time of writing in March 2021, cCSA has been uncovered throughout the Christian communion, despite having been carefully concealed by ecclesiastics at every level of authority. The C of E has been obliged to deal with thousands of complaints of cCSA and has taken desperate measures to cover up cases of abuse.^{20,21,22} Finally, analysing the latest government statistics, we assess whether clerics are more liable than others in society to sexually abuse children today.

Recent high-profile lawsuits and harrowing testimony given to public inquiries have kept the issue in the headlines. Meanwhile, cover-ups continue to surface, and victims' groups say the churches have not done nearly enough to guarantee reform and safeguard children. Church history is laden with prevarication and evasion in dealing with cases of cCSA.² Despite multiple demands for change to Church procedures and practices, safeguarding has been erratic and half-hearted. We explore evidence that ever since Augustine, cCSA has bedevilled the Church, while ecclesiastics have carefully papered over cases within their ranks.²³ Evidently, little has changed

and new cases are still being reported. In November 2020, the UK Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) reported that the crisis is 'far from a solely historical issue', adding that more than 100 allegations of cCSA had been reported each year since 2016.²⁴

I am indebted to Lorna Graham who wrote the final chapters of this book. With 26 years' experience of teaching in primary schools and in secondary religious education, Lorna writes with authority about infant proselytisation and the current obsolete connection between the state and religion. Media attention has rightly focused on radicalisation, highlighting the danger posed to society by fanatical religious indoctrination. Less attention has been given to the routine teaching in state-funded primary faith schools that Lorna explores. Some readers have expressed doubt that the practices described in these pages are relevant today. Lorna corrects this misconception with accounts of her primary school classroom experience, and parents themselves describe intensive faith indoctrination.²⁵ Ofsted reports give a disturbing picture of how primary school RE lessons are being conducted today.²⁶

Sex and Relationships Education (SRE), recently introduced into British schools, is not as widely taught as some might think. In fact, many schools do not publish a policy on SRE and others neglect to cover the subject fully or misrepresent the facts.²⁷ For an annual subscription of £456.00, Ten:Ten Resources will provide lessons to meet the government's requirement for objective relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) '...through the prism of Catholic RSHE'.²⁸ In other words, RSHE will be delivered in an explicitly distorted, faith-friendly form. Chapter 12 highlights the omissions and inaccuracies that result from schoolteachers failing to present the facts of life clearly and objectively. The failure to give comprehensive information on this important topic is liable to put young people at a serious disadvantage when they leave school.

Before progressing further, it is useful to clarify the lexicon used by professionals in the field. The terms **child grooming**, **child molestation**, **child sexual abuse** and **child sexual exploitation** (CSE) might

be used interchangeably by the media, but there are important distinctions. Grooming is the process whereby an adult prepares a child to ease the way for sexual abuse. Molestation is an outmoded term; child sexual abuse is more precise and is the preferred term to describe an adult using a child for sexual stimulation. According to Google Trends (trend.google.com), child sexual abuse is slowly becoming the more popular search string. CSE is an umbrella term, which covers all child sexual abuse including prostituting, trafficking and underage marriage.

The NSPCC says, ‘When a child or young person is sexually abused, they’re forced or tricked into sexual activities. They might not understand that what’s happening is abuse or that it’s wrong. And they might be afraid to tell someone’, and ‘Abuse is sexual touching of any part of a child’s body, whether they’re clothed or not.’ The Sexual Offences Act 2003 defines inappropriate touching as sexual assault if (a) the touching is intentional, (b) the touching is sexual, (c) the child is under 16. The Act goes on to define touching as sexual if a reasonable person would consider that, (a) whatever its circumstances or any person’s purpose in relation to it, it is because of its nature sexual, or (b) because of its nature it may be sexual and because of its circumstances or the purpose of any person in relation to it (or both) it is sexual. Touching includes touching, (a) with any part of the body, (b) with anything else, (c) through anything.²⁹

Thus, the boundaries for what constitutes child sexual abuse are wide but clear and detailed. Bearing in mind the context, and the relationship between clergy and altar boy, any touching other than hand to hand is inappropriate and therefore could meet the criteria for sexual assault. If I were to cite simply **abuse** or another general term when relating the incidents I encountered I might be alluding to any number of acts, varying in gravity and harm. Since there could be uncertainty, I have made a point of particularising the behaviours I witnessed or experienced and I trust the reader will understand the necessity for my accounts to be graphic and detailed.

From the time I could hold a pen, I have kept a diary in which I scribble anything that catches my interest. Although my notes were

never a strict chronological record of events, some of my early writing survives to trigger memories of my boarding school days. These recollections provided a starting point for laying out the evidence in the following pages with the authenticity of someone with a lifetime of involvement in the Christian community. With the Vatican decrying critics of the Church as 'friends of the devil',³⁰ I felt spurred to record my experiences to highlight the effect that Augustinian indoctrination has had on my life and on the lives of others.

Many of the issues raised here are not new. Countless luminaries have discussed failures in the school curriculum, and secular groups bristle with letters from former faith school pupils voicing their concerns. I will examine these concerns from the perspective of my personal experience inside and outside the sacristy to shed light on the interaction between clerics and children. Lorna focuses attention on state-funded faith schools where some children might be affected by the same guilt and moral confusion that has scarred many of us. We noted earlier that today over one million infants are undergoing similarly unhelpful schooling. Nearly all of them are likely to reject religion later. This book gives many good reasons for government to stop financing and promoting religion and end the Church's outdated participation in education.

A YouGov/Daybreak survey in September 2010 found that school performance was the factor highest rated by parents when considering schools for their children. The religion of the school was rated as an important factor by fewer than one in ten people.³¹ Over many years, opinion polls have consistently found that a majority of taxpayers do not want to fund faith schools. In June 2014, The Guardian reported a survey by Opinium showing that 58% of voters believe faith schools, which can give priority to applications from pupils of their faith and are free to teach from the perspective of their own religion, should not be funded by the state or should be abolished.^{32,33} Safeguarding should start with separating the state from religion so that schools do not indoctrinate young people and risk preparing them for possible abuse. Many Christian individuals and institutions

carry out valuable charity work, but compassion, altruism and goodwill are pervasive human values that span doctrinal boundaries. The good work done by some Christians does not compensate me, and millions of others, for the life-changing sectarian indoctrination that we endured. For those readers who think faith schools have a benign religious function, I hope that the personal experiences I describe and the research explored in the following chapters will give them cause to think again.

Given the wealth of positive assessments of Augustine already lining the shelves, a critical evaluation seems perilous, but I will depict the man as I see him. Every step of the way I have referenced my work with original material or other reliable evidence that supports it. Unfortunately, this has led to a rather overblown reference section, but better that than have my readers left doubtful. I would like to think that the ideas within are couched in terms accessible to all. That being the case, I apologise in advance if some viewpoints are perceived to be excessively polemical. I hope the reader will forgive any impertinence, given my background, and understand that no disrespect is intended.

The National Secular Society (NSS) (<https://www.secularism.org.uk>), Humanists UK (<https://humanism.org.uk>) and many other groups campaign vigorously for an end to religious influence in the education of young people. More information on many of the topics discussed in this book is available on their websites.

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THE WICKEDNESS OF ST AUGUSTINE

St Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, is probably the most influential theologian in history, alongside St Paul. His texts have been translated into numerous languages and his ideas have been pored over, quoted and debated since his death in 430 AD. Not only was he one of the most prolific authors in antiquity, but more of his output survives than any other writer of the period, most of it studiously catalogued in his own vain hand. As a result, his is the best-chronicled life of any figure from ancient history. The passion and fluency of his writing gives an extraordinary insight into the man and the ancient world he inhabited. He was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Boniface VIII in 1298. Yet, his most famous series of books, *Confessions*, declares his own lust and wickedness, and we will examine this contradiction in a moment. Augustine's productivity is only surpassed by the huge number of books describing and dissecting his life and literature. There is even a scholarly journal devoted to the study of St Augustine and his psyche.³⁴ Theologians, classicists and historians all acclaim his intellectual genius, although some historians have questioned the accuracy of his accounts. The most successful advocate in history, 1.2 billion people all over the world still follow his ideas 1,600 years later. Augustine's large oeuvre and the quality

of his prose are the key to his enduring power. However, despite the volume of literature, there is much we don't know and we should bear in mind that almost everything we do know has been sourced solely from the testimony of the writer himself.

Of the abundance of biographies on the bookshelves, those by Christian followers are not always objective. Rowan Williams, the retired archbishop of Canterbury, has written a fawning tribute rather than a thoughtful study of the man.³⁵ Celebrated historian and classical scholar Robin Lane Fox is more detached and measured in his assessment. A declared atheist, he nonetheless admires Augustine's 'restless intelligence and his exceptional way with words'.³⁶ With such profusion of worthy literature available, created by others far better equipped than I, a detailed life story is unnecessary here. We are interested in Augustine's ideas on sin, not so much in the man. A brief profile is needed to provide some context for what follows, but my view of Augustine differs from most conventional readings and I will explain why in due course.

St Augustine was born in A.D. 354 in Thagaste, Numidia (modern day Souk Ahras, Algeria) into an upper-class family. The name Augustine is a form of the title Augustus, which was given to Roman emperors to underscore their status and venerability. His mother was a Christian and his father a pagan, albeit one who converted to Christianity on his deathbed. Augustine was of mixed-race ancestry, but Latin seems to have been his first language. Although they were high-born, his parents were not wealthy and they scrimped and saved to give their son a first-class education. He studied grammar at Carthage, the great city of Roman Africa where he later taught rhetoric. The word 'rhetoric' comes from the ancient Greek *rhētorikē*, which means 'art of the spoken word'. In antiquity, rhetoric was defined as 'the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion' (Aristotle). In other words, Augustine's talent was similar to that required for today's public relations specialist or spin doctor. In Roman times rhetoric was an essential skill for politics, as it is now, but also for law, which was an honourable profession for a Roman gentleman.

Decoding the lines of Augustine's stylish prose, we note he admits to being a philanderer. One of his mistresses soon gave him a son whom they named Adeodatus, meaning 'Gift from God'. The mother was of a lower social class and Augustine never married her. Her name is unknown; his writing omits the names of many people, perhaps those he considered unworthy. He claims he was faithful, but after 14 years, when he was 28, Augustine abandoned her for a 10-year-old heiress. They could not get married because his new love was too young, but before she came of age he dumped her anyway and headed for Rome to further his career. Augustine was raised a Christian, but he renounced Christianity in his teenage years to become a Manichaean, a trendier religion at the time. Manichaeans believe in a spiritual world of powerful dualistic forces for good and evil (light and darkness) in eternal opposition. (Manichaeism is still practiced in some parts of China). Later, when it became fashionable and suited his purpose, he would return to Christianity, as we shall see. Now, the influential Manichaean contacts he had acquired through his opportune spiritual rebirth arranged a plum job for him in Milan as imperial professor of rhetoric. Regardless of the hand-up, Augustine must have been a gifted orator; Milan was the de facto capital of the Western Roman Empire.

What we now call child sexual abuse was customary in Augustine's time and locus. Pederasty, i.e. sex between high-born men and pubescent boys, was common in Milan. In modern times, the age of consent has been raised and pederasty is illegal, but in antiquity the threshold for sexual consent was drawn at a much earlier age.³⁷ A woman was considered a man's social inferior, and as such she could never compare to another man, let alone 'a sweet smelling boy'.³⁸ Originating in Crete in the eighth century BC, what we now call child sexual abuse spread in ancient times, and sodomy was widely practised by adult men on boys throughout the Roman Empire, as shown in art of the period. Such is the Warren Cup from the first century AD, a Roman artefact now in the British Museum. (Fig. 1.) The Warren Cup is decorated in relief with explicit images of a bearded man sodomising a young boy.³⁹



Figure 1. The Warren Cup 15BC–15AD

(Courtesy of © Trustees of the British Museum)

In ancient Greece the pederastic man-boy relationship had been part of the aristocratic social and educational system: an intimate relationship that aided the mentoring of a pre-adolescent boy, the eromenos, by an older male, the erastes. Pederasty continued into Roman times, albeit less openly because Greek culture was considered inferior. Romans perceived sexual expression in terms of the binary roles adopted, ‘penetrator-penetrated’ or ‘active-passive’ rather than ‘adult-child’ or ‘male-female.’⁴⁰ Males being the active penetrator, partaking in a relationship as a passive individual in Rome was considered dishonourable for a man. Ground rules were established about when a boy should be entrusted to a rhetorician, and the character of the teacher would have been validated in order to protect the boy’s virtue.⁴¹ Attitudes were changing and even before Augustine, legislation had been enacted to protect free-born minors from sexual activity where boys took the passive role.⁴² Although minors were not legitimate targets for penetration because

it violated Roman sexual mores, the practice was so well established that the law was widely ignored.⁴³ Railing against ‘sexual sins’, John Chrysostom, a contemporary of Augustine wrote, ‘...there is some danger that womankind will become in the future unnecessary with young men instead fulfilling all the needs women used to.’⁴⁴

Apart from technically illegal relationships with free-born boys, Roman citizen men commonly enjoyed sex with young slaves, and freed minors were also available as potential passive partners of a pederastic relationship.⁴⁵ Slaves were a viable option for a citizen man to have sex with, as long as they were his own slaves, because any shame brought down upon them was an inherent part of their subordinate status.⁴³ Additionally, even though slaves could gain their freedom and move into the *libertini* (freedman) class in Rome, they were often indebted to their former masters and obligated to continue providing them with sexual favours. It should be noted here that infant sex has never been normal or acceptable, either today or in Roman times. Young boys being sodomised would be postpubescent.

Most of what we need to pin Augustine down is contained in the series of books he called his *Confessions* and there is no better place to make a start. *Confessions* is a devotional prayer to God and also a confession and expression of sorrow for sinfulness. (Some scholars have claimed he was writing a confession of his faith, others suggest his purpose was to convince the reader that his beliefs were truly Christian. Augustine’s contemporaries were mistrustful of him as an ex-Manichee and suspicious of his brilliance as a rhetor.) Consisting of 13 books, written in Latin before AD 398, *Confessions* is regarded as the earliest surviving Western autobiography. It is incomplete, as it was written when Augustine was in his early 40s, and he lived well into his 70s, but it is the only comprehensive record of a life from the fourth and fifth centuries. Because little else remains from this period, any writers concerned with ancient history are obliged to turn to Augustine for support. Copied and quoted from manuscript to manuscript, Augustine’s *Confessions* have fed his legacy throughout the medieval period, creating an aura of authority around him.

Augustine has been quoted countless times, enhancing his influence and giving him weight as a reliable source.

But brilliant prose is no indicator of truth or legitimacy in what is written. Penmanship should not confer authority, and the scarcity of literature from the era should not validate his ideas. The elapse of 16 centuries since Augustine's death limits the validity of his opinions in modern times. The world has progressed and people are more civilised, better educated and healthier, at least in advanced societies. Most modern cultures have abolished the primitive customs of Augustine's time. Following enlightenment, the goalposts have been moved forward and today the age of consent throughout the UK is 16.

Notwithstanding the passage of time, for classical scholars Augustine's *Confessions* is an impressive achievement, described by several as a 'Christian masterpiece'. Despite the weight of scholarly endorsement, I see Augustine's works from a different perspective, and here I must declare my prejudice. Force-fed Augustine's introspective denunciations of sin and his avowals of subjugation and self-loathing, daily throughout my childhood, I feel less enthusiastic. I approach *Confessions* with a mixture of nausea and misgiving. I sense a dark side to Augustine.

For me, *Confessions* are Augustine's discourse with his personal God, his conceptualisation of his own superego. Boring through endless treatises on his sinfulness and lust, the reader is blitzed with self-flagellating tracts on guilt and repetitious protestations of remorse. The word lust appears 44 times, sin or sinners more than 100 times, mostly self-accusatory, but as we have noted earlier, sometimes he directs blame for sin and lust at infants. Describing himself in infancy, he writes 'weltering in filth and scratching off the itch of lust...my infant tongue spake freely to thee' (Book IX, p128). Claiming 'no one is free from filth in (God's) sight, not even an infant whose span of earthly life is but a single day' (Book I, p9), he continues 'The only innocence in infants is the weakness of their frames; the minds of infants are not innocent.' (Book I, p10). Later he declares '[infants] being yet little ones and carnal' (Book XII,

p213). We noted that pre-pubescent sex was unacceptable in Roman culture, yet Augustine penned letters to the British monk Pelagius repeating his claim that infants are carnal.⁴⁶

For the sake of clarity, in the Latin original, as in the English translation, the words **libido** (lust), **cupiditatem** (desire) and **sordes** (filth) do not necessarily have sexual associations. One might have a lust for food, or power or even fresh air. The three most common words for negatively connotated desire in Augustine's works, 'concupiscentia', 'cupiditas' and 'libido', have several interpretations which have been intensively analysed by Augustinian scholars. Bonner suggests 'sinful longing'⁴⁷ whereas Lössl suggests 'carnal hankering'.⁴⁸ The Latin **car-nales** is similar in meaning to the English word carnal, and Augustine repeats the word 35 times in his *Confessions*. In the case of infant concupiscentia, the context makes clear that Augustine is referring to sexual lust. The words he uses when describing his own sexual lust are similar to those used when describing the lust he sees in infants.

The average parent will readily accept that infants can be naughty, perhaps sinful even. A parent describing infants as carnal, weltering in filth and scratching off the itch of lust suggests sexual deviance. Could a perversion, since censored, have tempted Augustine to fantasise about infant sexuality? To me, the father of two delightful daughters, present at the birth of each of them, these descriptions of filth and lust in infants burst out of the page. Augustine had offspring but he and I have very different views of children. I read my daughters to sleep from a child's storybook when they were infants. As they fell to slumber, I saw purity in their well-scrubbed faces, blushed lips and dark lashes. I am at a loss to understand how their innocence could be corrupted into 'wickedness and filth', much less into carnal desire, but this is what Augustine wrote, and it is what Western Christians are required to accept.

Some academics have picked up on the sinister quality in his writing. Augustine has been eagerly and thoroughly psychoanalysed. His possible Oedipal crisis;⁴⁹ homosexual urges⁵⁰ and narcissism⁵¹ have all been detailed, discussed and dissected. Augustine admitted

mental torments, writing about his desires fighting between themselves. He complained, 'They tear the mind apart by the mutual incompatibility of the wills' (Book VIII, page 149). In the year 386, when he was 31 years old and in the throes of one bout of existential anguish, Augustine wrote that, prostrate and weeping bitterly over his uncleanness, he heard the voice of a child repeating the words 'tolle lege' meaning 'take up and read.' He thought that the voice was coming from a nearby house: he was not sure exactly where (Book VIII, page 126).⁴ He could not tell if the child's voice was that of a boy or girl, but the phrase echoed over and over in his head. It seems likely this episode came to him as a daydream, or it might have been a literary invention.

Augustine tells us that he picked up a copy of the Bible – presumably he was still daydreaming – and it fell open at a passage that exhorted him to turn to Christ and '...make not provision for the flesh, in concupiscence.' Augustine took this message from his subconscious as a mandate to reform. Some writers view *Confessions* as a pronouncement of Augustine's conversion to Christianity, but he does not mention Christianity or Manichaeism. As Lane Fox and other historians point out there is some doubt that Augustine ever in fact converted to Christianity at all and the mental turmoil that preceded the episode of resolve that he described seems overdone. We noted earlier that Augustine rejected Christianity in his teenage years. At the time of the *Confessions*, in 382, the Roman emperor Theodosius I issued a decree of death for all Manichaean monks. This seems a more likely motivation for Augustine's sudden endorsement of Christianity. Soon afterwards, in 391, Theodosius declared Christianity to be the only legitimate religion for the Roman Empire. The evidence is circumstantial, but it suggests that Augustine's apostasy from Manichaeism might have been more a conversion of convenience and self-preservation than a genuine change of heart. After all, he had chosen to turn away from Christianity when it suited his circumstances.

Augustine writes in a tormented manner, describing sexual desire or libido as a disease, obsessing over the wickedness of carnal lust and

claiming that infants are cursed with sin and lust. His inexhaustible preoccupation with rejecting his own sinfulness and sexual lust is bizarre. According to his biographer, Possidius, Augustine spent the last days of his life weeping over his sins. No other society, nor any animal, repudiates sex as Augustine does. His effusive remonstrance against the ‘...itch of lust’ he perceives in his infant self is suspicious. To paraphrase Shakespeare’s Queen Gertrude ‘The (bishop) doth protest too much, methinks.’ I have no professional training but I cannot help spotting that Augustine’s neurotic diatribe against lust exhibits features associated with a specific mental disturbance.

Reaction formation is a clinically recognised defence mechanism in which a person perceives their true feelings or desires to be socially, or in some cases legally, unacceptable, and so they overplay their opposition in an attempt to convince themselves and others that the reverse is true. Here is a scholarly description of the disorder:

It’s believed that reaction formation develops as a way to cope with the pressure and stress caused by the original feeling that they have identified as being bad and with the possibility of their true feelings or desires being discovered. For example, if a person has a particular sexual fetish that they feel is shameful, they may take every opportunity to condemn those who share the fetish in order to demonstrate to others that they are ‘normal’⁵²

Confessions is generally interpreted by theologians as a religious term for Augustine’s confession of faith. However, the intense rant about his sinfulness seems less a pronouncement of religious conversion and more an admission and ousting of his demons. Nobody had called a book *Confessions* before, but in the Hebrew scriptures confessions of sins were already well represented. In Roman law a confession before a judge was considered to have the same effect as a judgement, and for Augustine, ‘confession’ (confessio in the original Latin) meant an accusation of oneself. There seems little doubt Augustine was accusing himself of lust: we have noted that

he mentions lust 44 times. What is less clear is the focus of all this lust. Researchers have suggested that if Augustine's conversion was not from Manichaeism, perhaps it was a rejection of homosexual lust. Some commentators have suggested Augustine might have been homosexual or bisexual, and we have noted that in Augustine's time the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual was blurred. In Book III Augustine writes of his unholy loves. 'To Carthage I came, where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves. I loved not yet, yet I loved to love, and out of a deep-seated want, I hated myself for wanting not.' Some have interpreted his reference to 'unholy loves' as homosexual loves, but homosexuality was not unholy in Rome during Augustine's time, at least not for men taking the dominant or penetrative role.

After he left Milan in 390, his writings show an increasing degree of internal torment. Reflecting on the content of his literature, he might have had a preference for infants rather than adults. Paedophilia, sexual activity or attraction to underage minors was certainly unholy. It seems at least possible that Augustine might have been a paedophile (paedophiles are not necessarily child abusers – see chapter 11). We have noted his peculiar references to the lust and filth he saw in infants. According to the FBI the single most common rationalisation of all paedophiles is to blame the victim. Law enforcement officers, investigating cases of child sexual exploitation, emphasise 'The offender may claim he was seduced by the victim, that the victim initiated the sexual activity, or that the victim is promiscuous or even a prostitute.'⁵³ Recent reports suggest that the church would certainly have suppressed any evidence of paedophilia that might have existed from Augustine's time. His writings do not refer directly to paedophilia, and knowing his writing would be circulated, perhaps he was not willing to broadcast his compulsive weakness. Or he might have been so mortified by his loathsome appetite he could not bring himself to point directly to the true focus of his lust, a common attitude of paedophiles. He alludes to his possible compulsion when he says he was prompted to give up his sinful lust by a child. Augustine's

writings repeatedly accuse children of sexual desire; now he tells us that a child told him to mend his ways. His account of this messaging is dreamily vague: he was not sure where the voice was coming from or whether it was that of a boy or girl. Why did he choose to imagine a child prevailing upon him to give up sinful lust? Was this a child he had been attracted to, or one he was tempted to sexually abuse?

Psychologists tell us that paedophiles often hate themselves for their repulsive behaviour, but they cannot help their urges. Researching this possible connection, I found echoes of Augustine's writings in the recorded testimonies of convicted paedophiles. In correspondence directly with Dr Hammel-Zabin, (a prison therapist) Alan, (a convicted paedophile) admits sexually abusing more than 1000 boys. Alan was a boy scout leader and a deacon in his local church. He never shows remorse in his letters, but he does say he despises his compulsion.⁵⁴ Augustine's conversation might not have been a religious conversation away from Manichaeism to Christianity, but a conversion away from his paedophilic urges towards celibacy. Augustine already believed in God. 'The "name of Christ",' as Augustine's acclaimed biographer Peter Brown puts it, 'had always been present in whatever religion he adopted.'⁵⁵ Lane Fox agrees. 'It is a conversion away from sex and ambition.' (p289).⁵⁶

Whether or not Augustine was a paedophile is, of course, a matter of conjecture. What is not in doubt is that Augustine's view of infants was depraved, as our review of his writings confirms. To support his cause Augustine coined the word concupiscence, signifying 'physical desire, especially sexual longing or lust,' to describe exactly what he meant. The expression comes from the Church Latin verb *concupiscere*: the first syllable, *con-* (meaning with) + *cupi(d)-* (meaning desiring) + *-escere* (a verb-forming suffix denoting beginning of a process or state). He stipulated that newborns are concupiscent and that their sexual desire manifests itself into infancy, childhood and beyond. He insisted it cannot be removed by baptism or any other means. He repeated his view about infant lust in letters to the British monk Pelagius as we noted earlier.

The custom of papal canonisation had not yet been established when he died in 430 AD, but Augustine was made a saint by popular acclaim. Augustine's numerous theological, philosophical and spiritual works helped lay the foundation for much of Christian thought until the present time. Attitudes have rightly changed in 1,600 years, but perhaps less so for priests according to experts Thomas Doyle, Richard Sipe and Patrick Wall, co-authors of *Sex, Priests, and Secret Codes: The Catholic Church's 2,000 Year Paper Trail of Sexual Abuse*.²³ Child abuse by clerics stretches back unbroken through Augustine's time and Western Christianity remains tainted with his distorted view of children. Modern standards of moral conduct transcend Augustinian scruples, which are out of step with enlightened ethical values. In the next chapter and in those that follow we will look at how Western mores continue to be influenced by Augustine's outdated and abhorrent ideas.