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Vanity of Vanities in the Context of the Spirituality of Augustine of Hippo

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Study provides hermeneutics of the topic vanity of vanities in the work of early North African Christian writer Augustine of Hippo (354–430) based primarily on original Latin sources. The very notion of vanity comes from the biblical book Ecclesiastes; however, it also occurs in non-Christian textual traditions. The proposed hermeneutics is therefore aiming at promoting inter-religious and inter-spiritual dialogue. The content analysis of Augustine's views on the matter is conducted on both historical and theological backgrounds of the Augustine's times of the fourth and fifth centuries AD.

1 Introduction

“*Vanity of vanities, all is vanity*” (Lavoï 2006, 219–249) is a citation from the biblical verse of the *Book of Ecclesiastes* (*Qohelet* 1:2), the authorship of which ascribed by the tradition to the ancient King Solomon. The doubled name of the book is because the term *ecclesiastes* is derived from the Hebrew term *kahal* – “assembly”, and the second name indicates the preacher’s profession of the author.

In the Hebrew text of the verse *Ecclesiastes* 1:2, we find the term *hebel* – “vapour”, “breath”, “breeze”, that is everything that is *fleeting*, which was translated into the Greek *Septuagint* as *mataiotès*, and into the Latin *Vulgate* as *vanitas*.

Aside from *Ecclesiastes* 1:2, however, we also find other biblical references to *vanity* (e.g., *Psalms* 38:6, 12; 61:10; *Job* 7:16; *Proverbs* 31:30; *Romans* 8:20 etc.).

In Christianity, this verse was taken out of context very early on and became an independent statement influencing the development of spirituality in Christianity. We also find similar ideas outside of Christianity – in the ancient Egypt or Greece, for instance; it is one of the key concepts of spiritualities and religions of Indian origin (Dojčár 2008, 83; Dojčár 2013, 8). In the history of Christian thought, we find the first independent exegetical commentary to this Old Testament book, and later in separate discussions on spirituality, predominately in the monastic context.

Early Church authors, in the struggle against the Manichaeans and Gnostics, however, tended to avoid the cosmological understanding of this verse, connected with the term *everything* (Gr. *ta panta*), and emphasized more the meaning and value of material creation.

Among the authors who devoted themselves to the exegesis of this book, we can mention, for instance, the Greek-writing theologian Origen of Alexandria, who at the beginning of the 3rd century offered an interpretation in the context of three books ascribed to the biblical King Solomon – *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and the *Song of Songs* – and emphasized that the whole created world is subjugated to vanity and corruption. Hieronymus, the Latin commentator to the book of *Ecclesiastes* from the 4th century, emphasizes along these lines that the verse acquires its meaning upon the comparison of creation with God (Hieronymus, 522–523). The 4th century Syrian author Didymus the Blind understands vanity to mean material creation in comparison with spiritual beings, and although creation is beautiful, in comparison with them it, too, is vanity (Didymus 1977, 26–28).

← *Saint Augustine of Hippo*

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Later, in medieval Christianity, we find a great many commentaries on the subject of the *vanity of the world* (Lat. *vanitas mundi*), from which the related subject of *contempt for the world* (Lat. *contemptus mundi*) followed that had in their inner connection an impact on the development of monastic life and asceticism in Western Christianity. So, for example, in the 12th century this is for Alain de Lille the first subject of preaching to the faithful (Lille 1862, 114–116).

In the Reformation period, however Martin Luther leaned away from Hieronymus's interpretation, which scorned the created world and, resting on Augustine, placed vanity more among the human cravings (White 1987, 180–194).

The Second Vatican Council brought in the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* a certain invitation to a new understanding of this biblical verse. In the council's texts, the term *vanity* (Lat. *vanitas*) appears three times (*Gaudium et Spes* 2019, 37, 39; *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 2019, 17), and *vain* (Lat. *vanus*) two times (*Lumen Gentium* 2019, 46–47), while recognition of the *value* (Lat. *valor*) of creation thirty times.

2 Augustine and the Book of Ecclesiastes

In our study, we will devote ourselves to analyzing the understanding of the above-cited verse from *Ecclesiastes* 1:2 in the work of the African theologian St. Augustine (354–430), who in many important ways influenced the subsequent development of spirituality in Latin Christianity. We are convinced that clarifying his thinking will help in understanding the verse in the context of Western Christian spirituality, with a suitable distinction in understanding the subject of vanity in contemporary Christian spirituality, as well as in dialogue with the spiritualities of other religious faiths. The theologian of Hippo is a contextual author who also left us traces of the development of his thinking. Therefore, we consider perceiving the interpretation of this verse in the context of the intellectual struggles with three heterodox groups of Christianity against which he spoke most often, as important. We recall here at the introduction that the author's biblical citations often differ from the contemporary wording of the text and that his numbering of the psalms is different from the present numbering.

Near the end of his life (426–427), in his work *Retractationes*, Augustine notes that several Latin manuscripts contain the wording of the verse: “*the vanity of vain people*” (Lat. *vanitas vanitatum*), but that he later discovered in Greek manuscripts that this should be: “*vanity over vanity*” (Lat. *vanitas vanitatum*) (Augustinus 1999, 18). This is not only a philolog-

ical development of his thinking, but in particular his understanding of the consequences of inherited sin in the life of a Christian.

3 Augustine Against the Manichaeans

Augustine spent about ten years in the Manichaean sect, and after his conversion he wrote several tracts against them. In his commentary against the Manichaeans from 389–390, entitled *On the Morals of the Catholic Church and on the Morals of the Manichaeans*, he emphasizes the subordination of man to false goodness, which deceives him because he was created over them and he should be subordinate only to God. At the same time, in the context of the struggle against Manichaeism, which acknowledged the positive value of creation, he was careful to recall that creation as such is not a vanity: “*Vain are those,*” writes the theologian of Hippo, “*who are deceived by things of this sort; and he calls this which deceives them vanity – not that God did not create those things, but because men choose to subject themselves by their sins to those things, which the divine law has made subject to them in well-doing. For when you consider things beneath yourself to be admirable and desirable, what is this but to be cheated and misled by unreal goods?*” (Augustinus 1992, 44).

In his commentary on *Psalms* 4 (elaborated between the years 394–395), he again emphasizes that bodily creation as such is not vanity but can become so if the created man reverses the established order and seeks things that are in the order of creation beneath him as if they were above him in that order. In this context, he also deals with the subject of deception, which is connected to the concept of vanity; the truth means to give preference to the Creator over the creation (Augustinus 1956, 15).

4 Augustine Against the Donatists

Upon his return from Rome to Africa, Augustine found the African church separated into two parts: the Catholics and the Donatist sect. In the struggle against the schismatic Donatists, who referring to themselves as the “Church of the Pure” had broken away from the Catholic Church because they considered it to be full of sinners and traitors who cooperated with the Roman pagan power during the persecution, he again emphasized their incorrect quotations from the Bible. During a meeting of representatives of the Catholic Church with the Donatists in 411, the Donatist bishops refused to sit with the Catholics, citing *Psalms* 26:4 (whose current wording differs from Augustine's), which read: “*I did not*

sit in a meeting of vanity”, to which he quoted the second part of the verse, “[a]nd I did not meet with unjust people”. Thus, if the Donatists had already met with Catholics, they should have no problem sitting with them (Augustinus 1862, 599).

5 Augustine Against the Pelagians

Augustine most often devoted himself to the topic of vanity in the debate with the Pelagians. In the collection of texts from the period of this dispute, which stressed the self-salvation of man without God’s help, that is, man’s autonomy, we find several texts in which the author also quotes other biblical texts that address the topic of vanity. In 412, in an interpretation of *Psalms* 127 (we again recall that Augustine used a different numbering of the psalms), he reiterates the futility of human endeavor, in which man seeks “vainly and in vain” to act outside of Jesus Christ. To act outside the Savior Christ thus means to set off on the path of darkness (Augustinus 1956, 1857).

The interpretation of *Psalms* 39 (between the years 411–413) offers several new ideas in relation to the subject of vanity, and the author quotes a verse from *Romans* 8:20 (for the creation was subjected to vanity), along with *Psalms* 39:6. In the interpretation, the author describes the spiritual output of the soul, which is gradually freed from temporal things and ascends to God. During this spiritual ascent, man gradually becomes aware of the finiteness of his human existence and the vanity of all that is found on Earth. And so, transcending all created things, he disdains what is after him and rises spiritually to the sweetness of God’s law. Augustine recalls, however, and quotes a verse from the biblical book of *Job* 7:1, according to which life on Earth is only a temptation, if one suffers in this world full of scandals and insecurities of life, as well as a repeated return to excessive love for created things, so it is all mere vanity, and every man is mere vanity in the midst of the vanity of vain people; where, as we can see, he cites an even older version of the verse from *Ecclesiastes* 1:2 supplemented by the third verse: “What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun?” This third verse becomes the key to understanding this interpretation. Everything that is under the sun is only vanity, and it is necessary to spiritually rise to the mountain. In his view, a man trying to accumulate wealth is a manifestation of “stupid vanity” (Augustinus 1956, 411–413).

Augustine himself only perceives with difficulty his life under the sun, that is, in the created world, and the fact that he must proclaim this truth to people who are hungry for vanity. The entire created world is so in vain that it is as frag-

ile as the spider mentioned in verse 12 of *Psalms* 39. Simply pressing a little finger on the spider will cause it to die. The created man is equally fragile and finite due to his sinfulness. His life is full of unrest, because he marries in vain, as the author of verse 13 of *Psalms* 39 reminds the author (Augustinus 1956, 416–419).

It seems that the image of a fragile spider grabbed Augustine’s attention, because he returned to it in the interpretation of verse 4 (“man is like a breath”) of *Psalms* 144 (414) and interprets it through a verse from *James* 4:14, in which life is likened to “[a] vapour that appears for a little while and then disappears” (Augustinus 1956, 2081).

In his commentary on the longest psalm, *Psalms* 119, which Augustine interpreted after long hesitation as the last of the *Psalms* after year 422, he returns to the subject of vanity. Unlike Ambrose of Milan, who interpreted this long psalm through the biblical book the *Song of Songs*, Augustine read it through the lens of the letters of the apostle Paul, mainly through the *Letter to the Romans* (Lichner 2009, 81). In his interpretation, he links several biblical texts about the deceptive vanity of the whole of creation, which he contrasts with the figure of Christ, who is the real Truth as well as the Way. Thus, man should walk towards him and gradually free himself from the vanity of both material and immaterial facts (Augustinus 1956, 1700). In the last years of his life, Augustine devoted himself to a dispute with Bishop Julian of Eclan on the understanding of grace and its necessity in human life. However, the topic shifted more towards anthropology in the sense that man is born into a world with inherited sin marked by the inner struggle of the spirit with the body, the body’s lusts, quoting the already well-known biblical verses from *Ecclesiastes* 1:2, *Romans* 8:20, and *Psalms* 144:4, which confirm his view of the vanity not only of creation, but in particular of man marked by an internal ambivalence as a consequence of inherited sin (Augustinus 2004, 27). As we mentioned in the introduction to our study, several views from this period were then adopted by Reformation theology. In this controversy, Augustine often emphasized the nature of vanity and the finiteness of created human existence, so that the salvation role of Christ, in the person of whom liberation from vanity is possible, can excel even more (Augustinus 1862, 843). He also develops this view in the fourteenth book of his work on the *City of God*, where he stresses that man was created in truth and was subjected to vanity by transgressing God’s command, quoting his favorite verses from *Ecclesiastes* 1:2 and *Psalms* 144:4 (Augustinus 1955, 437).

6 Conclusion

Although Augustine used two different versions of the quotations from *Ecclesiastes* 1:2, this did not influence his intellectual development of the interpretation of the understanding of vanity. In his thinking, the whole created world is marked by mutability and finiteness; it is a world that is stamped with sin, and this is clearly seen in the life of the created man. He struggles with the futility of his mortal existence and the resulting divisions as a consequence of inherited sin. This spiritual perception of the futility of creation, including human existence, which we find in Augustine's work, was then adopted and inserted into the monastic context by Pope Gregory I (Lichner 2017, 354–381; Lichner 2019, 49–58) and is also found, as we have said, in Reformation theology.

The analysis of Augustine's works clearly indicates his inner experience with vanity. He pointed to three kinds of problems concerning the lives of consecrated persons: *property* (Lat. *lucrum*), *debauchery* (Lat. *stuprum*), and *desire for honors* (Lat. *honores*) that represented the vanity of creation for him. In this spirit, we interpret Augustine's spiritual conversion, described by him in his *Confessiones* only several years before his episcopal service. In the sixth book of the *Confessions*, Augustine admits his desire: "I was burning with the desire for honors, profit and marriage" (Augustinus 1981, 79). In the eighth book he describes the conversion of his will through the well-known phrase *tolle lege* – "take up and read". He concludes his description with the following words: "You have drawn myself to you and all of a sudden I was seeking neither a woman nor any hope of this world anymore." (Augustinus 1981, 132).

The theological thinking of St. Augustine, the theologian of Hippo, has been interpreted differently in history. The French patrologist Aimé Solignac distinguishes between two interpretive traditions of Augustine's thinking: a light tradition emphasizing the author's ingenious ideas, and a dark tradition that made him responsible for the pessimistic image of man in the Latin West (Solignac 1988, 835–849). When interpreting Augustine, we must first of all realize that he was a rhetoric and therefore often used a whole range of linguistic means. Many texts on vanity are marked by the use of hyperbole, which in literary theory we classify among the tropes. Hyperbole is a deliberate exaggeration to point out that the futility of creation is vanity only if it is diverted from its primary focus on God, who created everything. Man was created in order to ascend to God, and he must realize that the created world should help him with this, but also that this world, as well as man, is marked by vanity, which seeks

a goal in itself. Augustine is in love with God, and if what God created as good begins to stray from Him, then it becomes for him "vanity over vanity". When looking at God, Augustine overflows with the exaltation of God's splendor, and the actions of those who want to turn him away from Him are only the "vanities of vain people". Commenting on verse 2 of *Psalms* 146, around the year 395, he wrote the following words: "What is better in heaven than the Sun, the Moon, the stars? All this is very good, for God created everything all that is very good. The beauty of the work is visible everywhere, which highlights the Creator. Do you admire the construction? Love the Creator! Do not be interested in that which is made such that it would depart the one who created it." (Augustinus 1956, 2108).

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