

Book Title: Why Punish Me? Augustine's sinful lust unwrapped

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Suggested interview topics and questions:

Q. You have written a book about priests sexually abusing children, but that happened way back in the 1960s, it's history. Is anyone going to be interested in reading about it today?

A. *Sure, the number of cases coming to light have dropped, but the UK independent inquiry reported last year that this is far from a historical problem and they receive over 100 new cases every year. Because of bad publicity, it seems clerics might be more cautious. There is clear evidence that cases continue to be covered up. For two thousand years clerics have been sexually abusing children, and it is still a problem today. The reason why children get abused by clerics has become clear to me, after seventy years inside the church. Having been abused myself and having heard the testimony from dozens of enquiries I have compiled a dossier of evidence.*

But my book is not just about clerical child sexual abuse, it is more generally about how pupil's experiences in faith schools in particular sets them up for life with an unhelpful mental schema or mindset.

Q. You say schools teach kids an unhelpful mindset. What do you mean by that?

A. *Some children seem able to take a detached approach to religious ideas. For others, children who are sensitive as I was, being confronted with images of a man being tortured and nailed through his hands, can be distressing. Learning that I was sinful and having to repeat mock sinfulness again and again had life-long consequences for me.*

Let me tell you a little story. A friend of mine revealed that his dad hated seeing people baring an open mouth. When he was a boy, his dad often used to say that if a fly gets in your mouth, your teeth will turn black and fall out. He told me '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.'

Today, infants in many faith schools will repeat hundreds of times how bad they are. They will be told to pray for mercy and forgiveness, just as I was. The effects of ritual prayers of this kind are subtle, but significant. We are made quietly deferential. When things go wrong we might be inclined to feel guilty, even when we are faultless. In some cases this can lead to self-harm, as explained in my book. Because Augustine's ideas were inculcated when I was in primary school, I grew up believing that I was blameworthy. It was fifty years before I recognised that I was taking blame for things that were not my responsibility.

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Suggested interview topics and questions /Continued

Returning to the subject of violent images, medieval religious portrayals of suffering can be horrendously graphic. In some faith schools, pictures line the walls of a man wounded and bleeding from being brutally beaten. He is shown splashed with blood, being lashed with a whip, nailed to a cross and speared in the chest. Our own BBC heralds violent films with a warning for children. Yet the same BBC distributes videos of crucifixion and death to five years old infants.

Q. Your new book focusses criticism on St Augustine. Why pick on St Augustine?

A. *Augustine lived in unenlightened times. He thought all humans are wicked and he advocated self-abuse. He was an orator, an actor who would be described today as a 'spin-doctor'. He was very good at spin, so good that two thousand years later we still remember him. In his prayers to God, where he addresses his own superego, he is full of praise for himself. But most ominously I was disturbed by his preoccupation with sexual lust. He wrote that babies are all born sinfully lustful. In the original Latin the word lust does not necessarily have sexual connotations, just as it doesn't today. One can lust for possessions or money. The context denotes that Augustine specifically ascribed sexual lust to infants. When I looked at my children in infancy I saw innocence and purity, where Augustine saw sexual lust. He was a strange man.*

Now, our own British scientists have shown that man's innate sense of right and wrong predates Augustine by thousands of years. Far from religion offering a lead, religion was probably conceived to satisfy a human need to explain our evolved sense of morality. Ironically, Augustine's ideas threaten our willingness to cooperate and be kind. When we brand everyone with his dark label of fundamental wickedness, we lose the opportunity to address the causes of evil actions by ourselves and others. As Victor Hugo wrote in Les Miserables 'The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but the one who causes the darkness.'

Q. What made you write?

A. *From my perspective as a one-time acolyte, it seems to me that Christian indoctrination provides a perfect scaffold for the subsequent exploitation of a child. Teaching clerics they are Christ in person, telling them children are already stained with sexual sin, stipulating one-to-one hook ups in a confessional box for private discussions with children about sinfulness (and making masturbation a notable sin) all seem liable to invite exploitation of a child by someone who might already be inclined to abuse. To complete the recipe for clerical temptation, clerics are advised that they are assured of forgiveness while children are made to feel blameworthy and nurtured to trust and revere the clergy.*