

Response

St Augustine and R.R.R. on women

Writing on the eve of St Augustine's feast, may I defend him from the specific criticism of him made by Rosemary Radford Ruether in her article 'The Liberation of Christology from Patriarchy' (*N.B.* July/August 1985)?

She quotes a passage from his *De Trinitate*, 12.7.10 (not 7.7.10 as stated in her reference) in support of her assertion that like 'most of the Church fathers', he 'concluded that it was the male who possessed the image of God normatively, whereas women in themselves did not possess the image of God, but rather were the image of the body, or the lower creation, which man was given to rule over'.

I do not deny that Augustine, like all the fathers, lived in a patriarchal society which he largely took for granted. But he certainly never maintained that 'women in themselves do not possess the image of God'. I don't suppose he would ever have spoken of 'women in themselves', and I am not sure what R.R.R. means by it. But if he had used such an expression, he would equally have maintained that men in themselves do not possess the image of God.

His position, which he makes clear beyond a shadow of a doubt in books 9 to 14 of the *De Trinitate*, is that the image of God is to be found in the human mind (*mens*). Later in this same book 12 from which his critic quotes, he remarks that in the human mind 'there is no (distinction) of sex' (12.7.12).

The truth is, in this book he is involved in a very complex argument, and his view cannot be stated by one simple quotation—certainly not by the one made by R.R.R., the whole tenor of which she has misunderstood.

In the previous books he has been investigating various non-images, but 'vestiges' of the divine Trinity in the lower reaches of the human psyche. In book 12 he comes to its rational stage. He sees it functioning on two levels—the practical and the contemplative, to which he gives the qualities respectively of knowledge and wisdom. And then he chooses to interpret the Genesis story of Adam and Eve allegorically as referring to these two functions of the rational mind; Adam stands for the contemplative function of wisdom, Eve for the practical function of knowledge.

Thus what I think R.R.R. has not understood is that in the passage she quotes he is not actually talking about man and woman, male and female, at all. He is talking about the two functions of the human mind (where there is, in his view, no distinction of sex), in

terms of his allegory—and doing so in order to save Paul from the kind of sexist view of the image of God being confined to the male sex which R.R.R. so justly deplores. He is interpreting the Pauline passages allegorically also. He is saying that the genuine image of the divine Trinity is to be found only in the mind (of all human beings regardless of sex); and only in the higher or wisdom function of the mind, where the mind or self can remember, understand and love itself, and go on to remember, understand and love God. This higher function of the mind is also, of course, common to both men and women, to both Monica and Augustine, to R.R.R. and E.H.; but in Augustine's allegory it is represented by Adam, the man, not by Eve, the woman. That is the extent of his sexism.

The passage quoted by R.R.R. doesn't sound well, taken in isolation. But it shouldn't be so taken. In a translation I made of the *De Trinitate* more than twelve years ago (now being slowly but I hope surely incubated in the editorial offices of the *Ancient Christian Writers* series), I wrote this footnote precisely on this passage:

Here I must try to save Augustine from being torn to pieces by his feminist critics. He is not anti-feminist; indeed, his whole effort in this chapter is to maintain the equality of women as human beings with men, and their equal status as made to the image of God. That is why he insists on interpreting St Paul here symbolically. The reader must therefore bear continually in mind that the author is not talking about man and woman in themselves or about their real personal relationships, but about man and woman as symbols of two aspects or functions of the human mind. What woman symbolises as female is subordinate to what man symbolises as male. It does not follow that what woman is as person is subordinate, let alone inferior, to what man is as person, or that men do not engage as much, if not more, in the 'feminine' function of the mind as do women, and women as much, if not more, in the 'masculine' function of the mind as do men.

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